

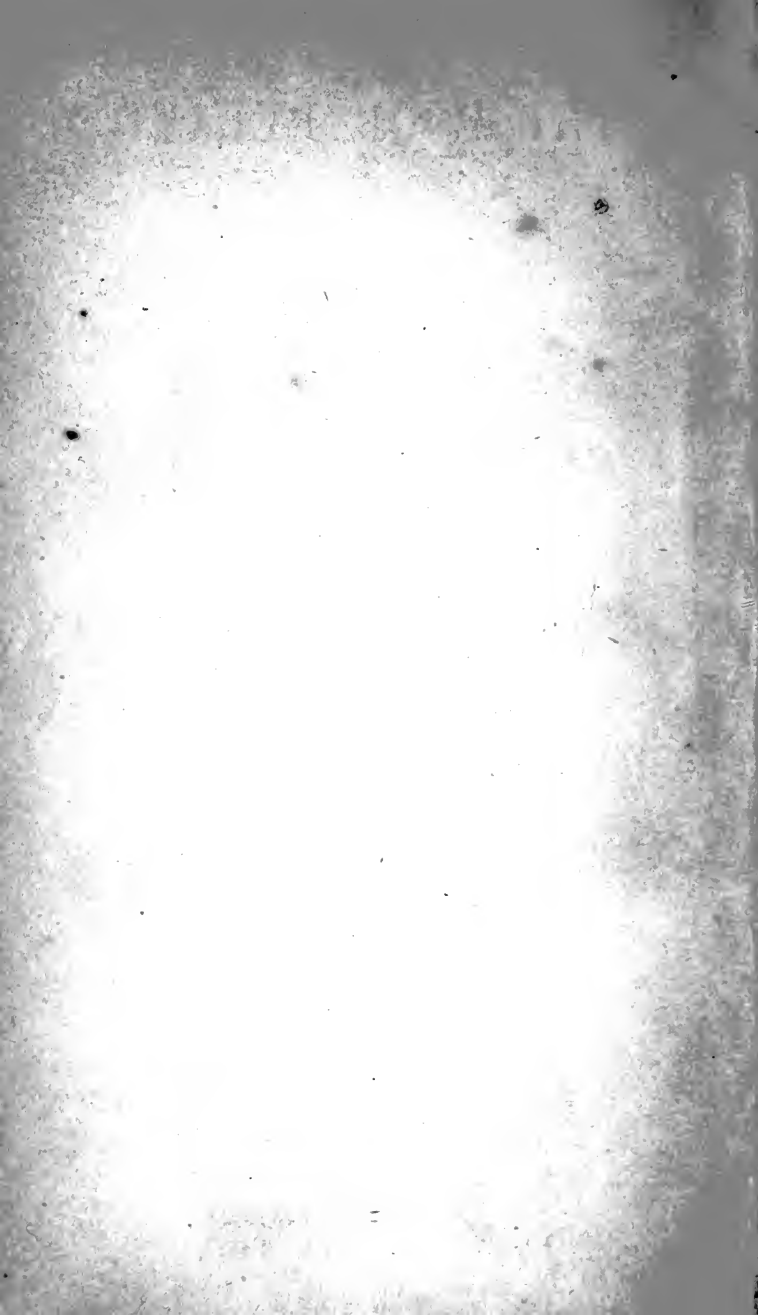




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THE POOR RELATION.

A NOVEL.

BY

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"THE LIFE OF MARIE DE MEDICIS,"

"THE CITY OF THE SULTAN,"

&c. &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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THE POOR RELATION.

CHAPTER I.

REMORSE.

THE career of Horace Ashton at Cambridge was, save in one solitary respect, highly satisfactory to his family. He had passed his examination not only with credit, but with honor. The example of his friend Hatherston had stimulated him to exertion; and, as his talents were considerable, although his industry was by no means commensurate with them, he returned home in all the glory of a degree.

It is true that Lady Harriette would willingly have dispensed with this distinction for her son, in whom she now saw only the future peer; for, as she assured him while compelling herself to add her own congratulations to those of his father and sisters, she considered that the thing was at once useless and plebeian; and could confer no credit on a young man with his prospects. Sir Hercules, however, thought otherwise; he remembered the brilliant college career of his brother; and although he had reaped no university honors in his own person, he was proud to feel that the Ashton blood had not degenerated.

This conviction indeed, it was which enabled him to support with more philosophy than he might otherwise have done, the enormous price at which the privilege had been purchased; for Horace, rendered reckless and extravagant by the perpetual reminders of his mother of the rank to which he must one day—and that perhaps no distant day—arrive; and careless

of the fact that the coronet of his grandfather was in fief to the Jews, had solaced himself in the intervals of study by indulging in all the dissipation of the wildest and wealthiest of his college associates.

The baronet, like most persons who have outlived all other means of enjoyment and indulgence, had gradually become more and more tenacious on the subject of money; and it was therefore with a bitter pang that, despite his already heavy remittances to his son, he found himself at the close of his residence at Cambridge, called upon to disburse a sum of sufficient magnitude to startle him very disagreeably. Under the circumstances, however, he forbore to chide, to the great relief of Lady Harriette, who had anticipated a stormy interview between them; and it was with her whole heart that she poured out to Horace her delight at his escape.

“It is, perhaps, more than I deserve, my dear mother;” was his earnest reply; “to

you, indeed, I may at once acknowledge that I feel it to be so ; and I am thankful that I did not initiate the excellent old governor into the whole of my secret. The fact is—”

“Surely, my dear boy ;” exclaimed Lady Harriette, as she suffered the daily paper to escape from her hand, and fall to the floor ; “Surely you are not going to tell me that you have other embarrassments besides those which you have confided to your father ?”

“I am obliged to confess that such is the case ;” said Horace, as a flush of shame rose to his cheek and brow ; “I have been very, very much to blame ; I do not seek to deny it ; but I believe that my head was turned by the news you sent me.—In short, I have acted like a madman ; and now I do not know which way to turn.”

“This is terrible !” said his mother ; “and at what an unfortunate moment does it occur ! In the hope of effecting the marriage of one, or both of your sisters, before the death of

my father should involve you in responsibilities, which, burthened with their maintenance, and the expense necessary to their appearance in the world in a style suited to their rank, you would be unable to meet, I have latterly more than doubled the amount of my yearly expenditure; for which I have, I can assure you, received more than one rebuke from your father, to whom I dared not confide the true motive of my conduct; while I have reason to know—for I have taken measures to secure the best information on the subject—that Lord Disborough has been nursing himself at the castle, on the pretext of still remaining inconsolable for the loss of his son; and that he is just now in better health than he has been for these last five years.”

“I am glad to hear it, my dear mother. I am young, and can afford to wait.”

“Nonsense, Horace!” angrily retorted Lady Harriette; “Suppose that on recovering from this fit of very prudent sentiment, he should

console himself by making a second marriage. You are well aware that he never affected any love for his daughters; and that he even honored *me* with his hatred, because, in the event of your uncle's death, and his own, without other male issue, I must succeed to the peerage, after having forbidden him my house. Nothing would surprise me less than to hear that a new Countess of Disborough had appeared upon the scene."

"And yet you never before even hinted at the possibility of such an event," said Horace gravely.

"I did not wish to damp your hopes;" replied his mother; "nor could I, of course, contemplate the improvidence of your conduct. What is to be done I know not. You had better, however, at once tell me the amount of your liabilities."

"And you will promise to forgive me?"

"I have no alternative; and I must endeavour to find some remedy for your rashness.

What do you still owe? And, who are your creditors?"

"My remaining debt amounts to one thousand pounds, and my sole creditor is Hatherston, who is not likely to press me; unless he should himself become embarrassed, which is not probable, as the liberality of his uncle knows no bounds—and besides—" added the young man with some hesitation; "I have a still better hold on his generosity and forbearance."

"Generosity and forbearance!" echoed Lady Harriette haughtily; "*my* son should not require either at the hand of any human being. But what is this bond between you?"

"His love for Florence."

"Horace! are you serious?"

"Perfectly so. You remember our last visit here—that decided poor Frank's fate."

"Could I only have suspected it—" murmured his mother beneath her breath.

"He was what is technically called 'over head and ears,' you may take my word for

it ;” pursued Horace, by no means sorry to change the subject of discourse ; “ he talked of nothing but her ‘ sweet unaffected simplicity ’—her ‘ beautiful girlish freshness ’—and declared that she was rapidly growing into the very woman that he felt he could worship.”

Lady Harriette winced ; for her conscience told her that during the last twelve months she had been busily engaged in destroying the “ simplicity and freshness ” which had won the heart of her son’s friend ; and that Florence, all-lovely as she was, had become under her guidance a precocious woman of the world.

“ And, by the bye, now that I have time to inquire ;” said Horace ; “ what has become of little Ella ? I have not even had a glimpse of her since I arrived. And the excellent Madame Despreaux ? Have they become invisible ? ”

“ My dear boy ;” replied his mother, with even more than her usual sententiousness ; “ as I was aware that you had unfortunately

contracted debts at Cambridge which it would be inconvenient to your father to pay at the present moment—although I was necessarily ignorant of their actual amount,—I considered it my duty to do all that was in my power to lessen the expenses of our home-establishment ; and I have consequently informed madame, that as your sisters have now appeared in society, and that their education is completed, we are compelled to dispense with her future services ; and she accordingly leaves Ashton Court in a few days.”

“ But little Ella ? ” exclaimed the young man ; “ surely she has neither appeared in society, nor completed her education. How can she dispense with the instructions of her governess ? ”

“ Really, Horace, to hear you talk one would imagine that your cousin was in a position which entitled her to interfere with my domestic arrangements ! ” said Lady Harriette, sharply. “ If she did not long ago profit

as she should have done by the advantages that were afforded to her it was her own fault ; and I therefore felt myself justified, in order to avoid the continual complaints of your father, and to reconcile him to your own heavy expenditure at Cambridge, to forbid the further attendance of half-a-dozen expensive masters on Miss Ella Ashton ; but I have no doubt that madame has done her duty by the child, and that she is sufficiently well-educated for the station which she is likely to fill."

"And am I to understand ;" asked Horace gloomily ; "that *my* faults and follies have deprived my father's niece of a single comfort or advantage ? Mother, I shall hate myself if you say that it is so."

"For mercy's sake do not overwhelm me with maudlin sentiment ;" replied Lady Harriette ; "Miss Ella Ashton is fortunate in having found so eligible a home as she now enjoys. I believe that we have come to a perfect understanding ; and I have to request

that you will not interfere in any way with our present arrangements."

"But surely——"

"Not another word, Horace, or I abandon you to the consequences of your improvidence. Your father is perfectly satisfied with all that I have done. Ella makes an excellent nurse; and is gradually becoming so useful in the family that I am almost reconciled to her intrusion beneath our roof. Indeed, under existing circumstances, I scarcely know how I could dispense with her."

The young man remained silent, but his mother could not mistake the expression of his countenance.

"I see;" she said with well-assumed indignation; "that you are quite disposed to become the knight-errant of this very injured young lady; but I warn you to be careful. My conduct towards your cousin has been the result of much and careful consideration; and I feel it to be the wisest course that can be

pursued, both as regards ourselves, and her own ultimate happiness. To have encouraged her in tastes and habits which she must have resigned in after-life would have been cruel in the extreme; while at her age she readily adopts without sacrifice or suffering such as may enable her to fulfil her duties in a humble sphere without effort. You will see but little of her; and I beg that when you *do* meet, you will remember what I have said."

Still Horace made no reply. He understood the heartless nature of his mother, and a suspicion grew upon his mind that the orphan had met but scant kindness during his absence. Trammelled as he was, however, he did not dare to expostulate; and bitterly did he at that moment regret the imprudence which had rendered him powerless under his father's roof. As a natural consequence, his anxiety to see Ella became after this conversation greater than ever; but before he made his way to the school-room, he proceeded to pay

his morning visit to the baronet ; while Lady Harriette hurried away to discuss some millinery question with Mademoiselle Sophie.

As he entered the apartment his eye fell upon Sir Hercules, who after a sharp paroxysm of pain had fallen into an uneasy sleep ; and thence wandered to a second figure which he at once perceived to be that of his cousin, who was seated near a table overstrewn with gauzes and ribbons, and so intent upon her occupation that she was unconscious of his presence.

Gliding into a chair beside her, he whispered softly : “ Your welcome was so tardy, Ella, that I have come to claim it.”

The orphan started and looked up ; but her surprise was far less than that of the intruder, as he gazed into the beautiful face that was suddenly turned towards him.

Not even as he had hung entranced over the page of the poet or the novelist, had Horace Ashton ever imagined such a countenance ;

and for a moment he felt as though he were the sport of a dream. Could this indeed be his little cousin Ella?—the sallow, impish child, who, after growing into the interesting, but still ungainly girl, was now expanding into the beautiful and radiant woman?—for with the usual precocity of her native clime the niece of Sir Hercules already looked the senior of her two fairer and more delicately-featured cousins. He could not recover his astonishment.

“Indeed, Horace;” was the murmured reply, as with a glad blush and a bright smile she extended her hand; “I am most happy to utter it; for no one beneath this roof greets your return more earnestly than I do; or has rejoiced more sincerely over the honors that you have won.”

“And yet I have been obliged to compel you to acknowledge this.”

The orphan sighed, as her large, dark,

melancholy eyes once more fell upon the work on which she was engaged.

“Why were you not with my mother and sisters when they received me on my arrival?” asked Horace reproachfully.

“You forget;” was the meek reply; “that I am no longer a child, to come and go at pleasure in your father’s house. I had no summons from Lady Harriette, and consequently I could not intrude myself.”

“Ella, what can you mean?” exclaimed the young man eagerly; “Am I to understand that you never join the family party except when you are desired to do so?”

“Never.”

Horace made an impatient gesture.

“That you do not visit with Florence and Matilda?”

“I never either pay visits or receive them.”

“From choice?”

“I have long ceased to wish for pleasure. You know that I am an orphan, almost a pen-

nilless one ; and therefore to me the world is, and ought to be, nothing."

"How then do you employ your time?" pursued Horace with increasing annoyance ; "your life must be a dreary one indeed if you confine yourself entirely to home."

"No, my dear cousin ;" said the poor girl, as she once more raised her eyes to his ; "my time is too fully occupied for weariness. My uncle requires my almost constant attention ; and while I am watching over him, I am occupied, as you see, in little offices of usefulness for Florence and Matilda ; Mademoiselle Sophie being unable to vary the dresses of my cousins sufficiently without assistance, now that they are so constantly out. Besides you know that I have my studies to attend to ; and these, with the exercise necessary to my health, seldom leave me an hour unoccupied."

"You are then it would appear ;" said Horace bitterly ; "Mademoiselle Sophie's as-

sistant as a sempstress, and Mrs. Brooks's substitute as a sick nurse?"

"Nay, nay;" smiled Ella; "you take a strange view of the case. What dearer duty can I have than that of endeavouring to soothe the sufferings of my dear, kind uncle? Or what greater pleasure than in gratifying your sisters, who have almost persuaded me that the half-wild Indian girl has become a better milliner than the Paris-taught Frenchwoman?"

"Ella;" whispered the young man; "you surely cannot be so thoroughly reconciled to the part which you have been compelled to play in my father's family as you are endeavouring to induce me to believe."

"And why not, Horace?" asked the orphan without a quivering, either of the lip or eyelid; "Do I not now owe everything to my uncle? And have I not been early, and perhaps mercifully, taught by Lady Harriette that my future life must be one of obscurity and exertion? Oh, believe me when I assure you

that I have determined to look steadily upon the future ; and if possible to forget the past."

"Do you then intend to degenerate into an automaton?" was the abrupt and angry enquiry.

"Would that I could!" exclaimed the orphan no longer able to control her emotion, as she clasped her hands hard together, and the hot tears, so long bravely suppressed, forced their way, and fell large and heavy upon her pale cheeks ; "But is it kind, Horace, to encourage a weakness against which I am daily and hourly struggling? You mean to be considerate, my dear cousin ; I am sure you do ; but on reflection you will feel that the peace of my existence must depend upon the resignation with which I yield myself to circumstances that are inevitable."

"And have you never at least expostulated with my father?"

"Of what have I a right to complain?" was the answering enquiry ; "Am I not shel-

tered by my uncle's roof? Protected by his guardianship? and could I feel justified in asking more?"

"Most assuredly you could;" said the young man; "your father's daughter ought also to command the affection and indulgence of every one beneath *this* roof; and so it *shall* be, Ella, if I have any influence in the family."

"Let me entreat of you, Horace——"

"I will listen to no entreaty;" was the indignant rejoinder; "I will not believe that my mother can be sordid enough to desire to degrade you into a menial; or that my sisters are so weak as to be jealous of your beauty; but tell me, what says the excellent Madame Despreaux to the existing state of things?"

"She urges me to be patient, and to submit."

"And she, I hear, is about to leave Ashton Court?"

"Yes—very soon—in a few days——" sobbed

out the orphan ; “ and that, indeed, is my greatest grief ; she has been so kind, so judicious, so generous a friend.”

The young man started to his feet. In an instant he understood the whole scheme and bearing of his mother’s calculations. Ere long the orphan would be alone and powerless in her hands ; and she had told him that it was for *his* sake that she committed this grievous wrong—for *his* sake !—To conceal from his father his reckless extravagance, and to enable him the more easily to resume a life of self-indulgence and folly !

Ella could scarcely recognize him as he stood before her with flashing eyes and quivering lips, shaken by the storm of passion which caused his whole frame to tremble ; nor did she alone gaze upon him with mingled wonder and alarm ; for the abruptness with which he had sprung from his chair had disturbed the painful slumber of the baronet, who sat silent and motionless with his eyes

rivettted upon his son, as if fascinated by the intensity of an emotion such as, during his own placid and uneventful life, he had seldom contemplated.

CHAPTER II.

FATHER AND SON.

ELLA was the first to break the painful silence we have described. She laid her hand gently on the arm of her cousin, and murmured out sadly, but earnestly, an entreaty that he would calm himself, and believe her when she assured him that indeed, indeed, she had nothing to complain of, nothing to resent. Even Florence and Matilda had their little trials; and how could she, a poor motherless and fatherless girl, expect to pass through life without her own struggle? Horace, however, was too much and too painfully excited to be tranquillised even by those

touching words ; nor was it until Sir Hercules in his turn addressed him, that he forced himself to assume at least the semblance of composure.

“What is the meaning of this burst of passion, my dear boy ?” asked the baronet ; “what on earth has happened to excite you in so extraordinary a manner ? You actually terrify me, Horace !”

“I believed that you were asleep, sir ;” gasped out the young man ; “but, perhaps, it is better as it is.—Father, how often you have talked to me of your brother ;—how often you have even shed tears over his memory—and yet—”

“What, Horace ?”

“Look at his child—his only one—who must have been dear to him as his heart’s blood ; and tell me what she has become under your roof. The substitute for an extra menial ; your own sick-nurse ; and the uncomplaining slave of your daughters’ whims.

Do you see all this paltry finery? It is not for herself that she is wasting her young life in these frivolous pursuits: she is toiling for Florence and Matilda; that while she sits uncared-for save as regards her usefulness in her monotonous home, *they* may flaunt their fashion in the eyes of their friends.—And do you know, sir, what reason is assigned by my mother for the degradation and neglect to which she has condemned your niece? I will tell you. It is, by compelling her to *earn* the pittance for which she is indebted to the relatives of her father, to counteract in some degree the effects of my own fatal folly and extravagance; but surely I am already sufficiently punished by the reproaches of my own conscience, without being compelled to suppose that my selfishness has made my family unjust to one whose misfortunes, even had there been no tie of blood between us, should have rendered her sacred in our eyes.”

“ My *dear* cousin—” urged Ella.

“Horace, what can you mean?” asked Sir Hercules.

“Father;” pursued the young man, as he approached the baronet and looked earnestly at him; “has your kind, warm heart never prompted you to feel that the life which this poor girl is leading beneath your roof is ill-suited to her years? And do you, can you, for a moment consider it right or reasonable that she should pay the penalty of my faults?”

“Horace, you make me wretched!” exclaimed the agitated invalid; “Do you mean me to understand that my dear little Ella, the comfort and solace of my weary hours, who I have learnt to love like one of my own children, has not met with all the tenderness which is so justly her due from every member of the family?”

“I am grieved and ashamed to be compelled to reply to your question by a decided negative, my dear sir;” said his son; “had you not been prostrated by illness, you must long

ere this have perceived that Ella has gradually become the equal of Mrs. Brooks, and the coadjutor of Mademoiselle Sophie. Was not her faithful Diana driven from the house where she had richly earned by her devotion and fidelity a home for her old age? Were not the several masters, who might have secured to her the same advantages as to my sisters, politely directed to confine their future instructions to the two elder Miss Ashtons?—Nay, Ella, let me speak; it is time that my father should hear the whole truth; his honor and loyalty to the memory of his dead brother require that he should do so.”

“But, indeed, my dear cousin—”

“I know all that you would urge, Ella; and I entreat of you to let me fulfil the painful duty that I have imposed upon myself.”

“You are right, Horace; you are right, my son;” said Sir Hercules, struggling to appear calm; “I have been greatly, miserably selfish—frightfully blind to what was passing before

me and about me. You are right to awaken me from my lethargy. Come here, my poor injured Ella; let me feel your head upon my breast, and your hand in mine, until you have promised to forgive all—all—for I greatly fear that you have much—very much to forgive.”

Trembling in every limb, and drowned in tears, the orphan did as she was desired; and the soul-stricken baronet folded her to his heart with an earnestness which in a moment of less excitement would have terrified him for his suffering limb. As he did so a smile passed over the features of Horace, but it rapidly vanished, and he resumed as gravely as before.

“You will readily understand, sir, that it costs me a painful effort to attach blame to a mother who has only been too indulgent and forbearing to myself; but because it is I who have been the cause of the evil, I have no alternative save to denounce from this moment

all injustice shewn to your niece in order to conceal or to palliate my own want of self-government. *I* am the culprit, and that to a far greater extent than you are as yet aware of; and I am ready to expiate my past errors by any penalty that you may see fit to enforce. I have told you already how the education of Ella has been blighted."

The orphan raised her head from its resting-place, and would have spoken; but Horace continued, as he motioned her to silence; "The accomplishments suitable to her station in life were consequently abandoned, to be replaced by those of a milliner; and—forgive me, my dear father—of a sick nurse. She was permitted to join the family circle only when summoned to do so, in order to render herself useful to those who had once treated her as an equal, and a relative; but still she one friend left—the child of your brother was not yet quite desolate under your roof. The individual best calculated by cir-

cumstances to estimate her worth still loved and cherished the orphan. Madame Despreaux has, as I heard from her own lips, been to her almost a second mother ; and now, my dear Sir Hercules—now, my dear father—the excellent Frenchwoman is dismissed in her turn ; and Ella is flung solely upon your own affection.”

“ And it shall never fail her !” exclaimed the baronet, huskily ; “ I ought to have seen, to have understood, that the very tranquillity and timidity for which in my egotism I loved her, were qualities ill suited to her youth. Lady Harriette has no doubt been misled by a false sentiment of prudence and expediency, but I have no such excuse. I will expostulate with her upon the subject ; and rely on it, my dear boy, that all Ella’s wrongs shall be redressed. The past is unfortunately beyond our power ; but the future at least we may control ; and by that future she must indulgently judge us.”

The sobs of the orphan became more and more audible.

“I expected no less from you, my dear father ;” said Horace, as he grasped the hand which the baronet extended to him ; “and now, having secured the happiness of my cousin, let me implore your forgiveness for myself ; and confess at once, that from the same want of manliness which has been the primary cause of all my errors, I have hitherto concealed from you the extent of my liabilities. I am far more deeply involved than I had led you to believe ; and I now earnestly request that the outlay which the European tour that you were kind enough to propose to me on leaving college would have cost, may be devoted to the payment of my debts. You are yourself an example that an Ashton may do honor to his name and to his family without foreign travel ; allow me to forego the privilege which I have justly forfeited by my misconduct, and to remain at home ; where I shall hope to become

at once your substitute in business-matters and the companion of your hours of suffering."

"Horace;" said his father with quivering lips; "we will talk no more of this to-day, when I have told you that, at any cost, the promise which I made to you shall be fulfilled. I will not deny that I am grieved and disappointed to find that—that—However, we will discuss that subject some other time. You have redeemed all by your candour and confidence in the affection of your old father; and now make yourself easy, all shall be arranged. By the bye, my dear boy;" he continued, as large tears gushed from the eyes of his son, and fell upon the hand which he still held clasped in his; "it is a fortunate circumstance that Geoffry Goldworthy is anxious to purchase the Willow Farm. It abuts upon his park, as you know; and consequently, as your mother very justly remarked, it is of more value to him than to any one except ourselves;

and I really do not see why we should so much regret parting with it."

"But, sir;" expostulated the conscience-stricken young man; "Mr. Goldworthy has coveted that farm for years, and you have constantly refused to cede it to him; do not then, I entreat of you——"

"Pshaw! pshaw!" interposed the old gentleman; "it is never too late to be wise. My mind is made up on the subject. Your debts whatever be their extent *must* be paid; for no son of mine shall commence life trammelled by obligations which he cannot meet. My pretty Ella, my kind, devoted nurse, must no longer have cause to consider herself an alien in her uncle's house; and you must forthwith set out upon your travels, and not lose so admirable an opportunity as the companionship of your friend Hatherston. And after all;" he pursued in a tone which he struggled to render gay, but which only became more tremulous from the effort; "we

shall never miss the farm ; and it is so many centuries since we have sold a rood of land that we need not worry ourselves about it ; so you shall write to Geoffry for me ; and your first legal act shall be to append your signature to mine in the transfer of the Willow Farm."

"Is this sacrifice indeed necessary, sir ?" asked Horace sadly.

"I think so—it strikes me so—" was the troubled reply ; " but why should you call it a sacrifice ? If it is to purchase peace of mind for yourself, and justice for your cousin, it is surely very well so to dispose of it. Besides, boy, it is not like a moveable chattel that the old manufacturer could carry away to exhibit in his town-house. It must remain where it is, and where we have been accustomed to see it. The thing is therefore merely ideal after all ; and we shall only be reminded of the transfer on quarter days, when Watson pays his rent to our neighbour instead of to ourselves."

Poor Horace ! The self-abnegation of the

high-hearted old man cut him to the very soul. Here was he, barely on the threshold of manhood—at an age when he should, and might have been free from all the trammels by which he had wilfully fettered himself—already the means of dismembering an estate which had remained intact for many generations ; and to every acre of which he was aware that his father clung with the tenacity of long habits and old associations. He was indeed bitterly humiliated ; and could far better have borne reproach and anger than this uncomplaining and self-sacrificing generosity.

He expostulated, however, in vain. Sir Hercules had once more, for a brief interval, donned the lion's skin ; and he was strong in his determination.

“ Honour, my dear boy ;” he exclaimed, in reply to the deprecatory entreaties of his son ; “ Honour before land ; honour before pride. Were we even dispossessed of every rood of our estate, we must still remain the patriarchs

of the county. The family-vault of the Ash-tons tells a tale that no mere worldly losses can ever efface from its chronicles. So enough said ; enough said. Let the Willow Farm go, and old Goldsworthy have his way at last. I will see your mother, and all shall be arranged. It will be a comfort to her, I know, to feel that you will leave your home a free man ; and I will trust to your prudence to keep within bounds in future."

"On my soul I will, sir ;" said Horace, as he bent down and pressed his lips upon his father's grey hairs ; "I have learnt a lesson to-day that I shall never forget."

"Well, well ;" replied the baronet, brushing away a tear ; "now all is understood between us, and you must fulfil your promise to Hatherston. A fine young man is Frank Hatherston ; a very fine young man ; and the most agreeable companion you could have had during your travels ; there could not have been a better arrangement ; and now leave

me, both of you ; I wish to see your mother alone ; so sweep up your gauzes and ribbons, Ella, and take a turn in the grounds with your cousin, for your pale cheeks make my heart ache. Poor child ! Poor child ! but all will come right yet, Ella ; we shall all be happy soon, my dear girl. There, there ; give me a kiss, and run for your bonnet. Away with you, Horace, and don't keep her waiting. Send one of the servants to tell your mother that I shall be glad if she can spare me half-an-hour ; and keep your mind easy, for all will be right in a few days."

CHAPTER III.

FEMININE TACTICS.

WHAT transpired between Sir Hercules and his lady during the interview which succeeded the conversation detailed in our last chapter, can only be surmised from its results ; but thus much is at least certain, that it extended far beyond the “half-hour” anticipated by the baronet ; and that Lady Harriette finally reappeared, calm, if not radiant ; and had scarcely seated herself at her inevitable embroidery, when she rang and desired that “the three Miss Ashtons” would join her in the morning-room. To Ella this summons, far from producing the pleasurable feeling which was

probably anticipated by the lady of the mansion, was a source of serious annoyance ; she was so seldom in the society, or rather presence of her aunt, without being subjected to mortification, that she had habitually shewn herself as anxious to avoid all contact with her haughty relative as Lady Harriette, save on occasions when the services of her niece were in requisition, to appear utterly oblivious of her existence. There were, moreover, two additional reasons why Ella would fain have remained unnoticed as usual on this particular day, for she was already weeping over the rapidly-approaching separation from her attached and devoted friend Madame Despreaux, to whom she clung only the more closely as she remembered that their very hours of intercourse were now numbered ; while the long and affectionate conversation which she had just held with Horace during their stroll through the grounds, and in which he had assured her that she should find in him

the tender love of a brother under all circumstances, and amid all difficulties, had filled her heart with a new and strange sensation of happiness which she pined to feed upon, unquestioned and undisturbed.

The wishes of Lady Harriette were, however, like those of royalty, courteously expressed commands—the iron hand gloved with velvet—and against her will, even in trifles, there was no appeal. Such being the case, Ella pressed her lips to the cheek of the gentle Frenchwoman, who was engaged in writing a lengthy epistle to the relatives from whom for so many weary years she had been separated, to prepare them for her re-appearance among them once more, and to claim her place in their hearts, and beside their hearths—and then, hastily snatching up some of the delicate materials destined to adorn the persons of her cousins, she proceeded at once to the presence of her aunt.

“ Good morning, Ella ;” said Lady Har-

riette ; as, involuntarily, the orphan paused for an instant at the door ; “ I trust that I have not disturbed you at your studies by asking the pleasure of your society in my own apartment. Should it be so, however, you must forgive me ; as, finding that you feel aggrieved at your occasional exclusion from the family circle, I have ventured the invitation at all risks ; not being sufficiently familiar with your peculiar habits to be aware precisely when it might be most agreeable to you to join us.”

“ I have never complained of the exclusion to which you allude, madam ;” was the cold and calm reply.

“ Oh, no ; you have acted with great discretion, my dear ;” pursued her aunt ; “ and you had really a very zealous champion in *my* son, who broke a lance for you in a way which would have done honour to a knight-errant. It might, perhaps, have been better if his prowess had not been shewn in tilting against his mother ; that, however, is a trifling

consideration which can only be interesting to myself, so we will change the subject. Pray take a chair. May I ask on what you are occupied ?”

“I am finishing Matilda’s dress for Lady Masham’s ball, madam ;” said her niece quietly, as she seated herself at the table ; “I have completed that of Florence, and taken it to her room.”

“Ring the bell for Mademoiselle Sophie ;” imperiously exclaimed Lady Harriette, looking towards her daughters ; “Miss Ella Ashton has condescended too long to give you the benefit of her taste and skill ; and has become weary of her good-nature. I insist on it that you never again trouble her in the same way.”

“I am sure I can’t tell what we shall do then, mamma ;” said Matilda, half pouting ; “for Ella makes everything a thousand times better than Mademoiselle Sophie ; and I am certain that if you were only to have seen how hard she has worked for the last four days,

you would never doubt that she was helping us with all her heart."

"You have heard my orders;" was the stern reply; "and Miss Ella Ashton also; consequently she must be aware that I shall feel obliged by her laying down her work at once, and finding some other employment."

With a cheek as pale as marble, but with tearless eyes and apparent composure, the orphan did as she was directed; and in another moment the task was transferred to Mademoiselle Sophie, greatly to the disgust and disappointment of the latter; who, as she gathered together the gauzes, ribbons, and laces, volubly poured forth her conviction that she never should prove equal to the accumulation of labour which was thus suddenly thrust upon her."

"In that case I must replace you by some one who will be competent to the situation;" was the calm retort of her mistress; upon which, with a heightened colour and a sullen

brow, the indignant soubrette swept out of the room.

“ With your permission, madam ;” said Ella, rising from her seat as calmly as though her very heart had not been wrung by the bitter irony of her aunt ; “ since I can no longer be of service to my cousins, I will go and see if my uncle does not want me to read to him as usual.”

“ Sir Hercules Ashton can dispense with your good offices ;” said Lady Harriette, with a haughty bend ; “ He has been informed that your late attendance on him in his sick room has undermined your health, and he is consequently resolved that you shall in future be spared all fatigue on his account ; while I have no doubt that he will find Andrews and Brooks very efficient substitutes for yourself, without subjecting *them* to either annoyance or suffering.”

The orphan sank down again upon her chair. This was a new system of persecu-

tion for which she had been totally unprepared. Feeling, as she had long been compelled to do, that she was a burthen upon her father's family, and that she could only diminish its weight by exerting all her energies to be useful, she now suddenly found herself deprived of all means of such usefulness, and more bitterly dependent than ever. She, however, uttered no expostulation, but remained with her hands clasped together listlessly in her lap, and her head bowed upon her bosom; until Lady Harriette, who had succeeded in working herself into a very uneasy state of temper, exasperated alike by the restraint of her presence, and the patient immobility of her attitude, could no longer control herself, and asked sharply,

“Pray, Miss Ella Ashton, do you intend to pass the morning in looking at your fingers? Have you no occupation upon which you might be profitably employed, instead of sitting opposite to me like a sulky school-girl?”

“I have none, madam, which it would be respectful to pursue in your drawing-room;” was the quiet reply, as the orphan raised her large clear eyes to the face of her aunt, with a gaze at once so steady and so sad that, had she cared to do so, the cold-hearted woman might have read in them the sufferings of the helpless victim whom she was thus mercilessly persecuting; “I have latterly employed my leisure moments in repairing my own dresses, and I could not presume to litter your work-table with shreds and patches.”

“Be good enough, in that case, to return to your own apartment;” said Lady Harriette, whose angry frown could not conceal the blush which forced itself to her cheek; “Your champion will, no doubt, shortly join you there, when you can arrange together the restoration of your wardrobe; and, pray, remember, Miss Ella Ashton, that you will be subjected to no interference on my part.”

Even this last taunt failed in its anticipated

effect. Not a trace of emotion was perceptible on the countenance of the orphan, who rose, curtsied profoundly to her aunt, and left the room. Had Lady Harriette seen her, however, when, having reached her cheerless attic, she flung herself wildly across the bed, every limb trembling, and her beautiful features convulsed with agony, she would scarcely have ventured the remark to her daughters that "the girl" would end badly, for she had no more feeling than a stone.

"Talk of taking an ungenerous advantage of her position, indeed ;" she continued indignantly ; "as Sir Hercules actually accused me of doing, because I considered it my duty to prepare her in some degree for the life of obscurity and exertion which she must lead when once she leaves our house ; I consider that, whatever may be her own opinion—and there can be no doubt that she prompted your father—I have been her best friend : but even were it otherwise, there would be little encouragement to pet and spoil a person who is

evidently insensible to both praise and blame ; unless indeed, which is very probable, she is careless of either."

The sisters listened to this bitter tirade, which, even had it been merited by its object, was under the circumstances even more injudicious than ungenerous ; and as was extremely natural, adopted without examination the sentiments of their mother. They were moreover inclined to consider themselves very much aggrieved by the fact that Ella was no longer to exert herself as she had hitherto done in their behalf ; and with the usual impetuous recklessness of youth, forgetting that it was by no volition of her own, they resented it accordingly. It was really too bad, as they declared in their turn, that Horace should have interfered when everything was going on so smoothly ; whereas now, Mademoiselle Sophie would be unbearable, and they should be perpetually disappointed ; for as their mamma well knew, she never would do anything properly when she was out of temper."

“You must have patience for a time, my dears ;” said Lady Harriette oracularly ; “and depend on it that all shall come right at last. And now one of you had better go to your father, and see how he is getting on with Andrews : for he is so infatuated with Ella, that I am convinced he will be as peevish as a child. Do all you can, therefore, to pacify him, for I have resolved that she shall not enter his room for some days to come. And trust me ;” she added with a smile which would have done no discredit to the lips of Mephistopheles ; “he will soon find that he cannot dispense with the attendance of his favourite, and will be the first to negative his own arrangements. Moreover, Horace will leave us in a week or two, and I shall be released from the wrong-headedness which has placed us all in a false position. There—go, both of you ; and make no remark to your father upon the subject.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WILLOW FARM.

THE Willow Farm was as pretty a little snuggerly as any country gentleman could desire to add to his estate; and it was therefore not wonderful that Mr. Goldworthy, after a long life of commercial industry, upon finding himself the owner of a noble landed property in a ring fence — save and except the farm in question, which, as we have already mentioned, intruded wedge-like its prolific orchards, its teeming fields, its substantial out-buildings, and its roomy, picturesque old house covered with creeping-plants, within his boundaries, overshadowed

by the old oaks and elms of Ashton Court on the one side, and by the less ancient, but more ornamental timber of Goldworthy Hall on the other—should have been anxious, from the very hour in which he took possession of his new home, to complete the circle in which it formed so unwelcome an angle: believing, as men who had found money in their own case the Archimedian lever by which all difficulties are raised, that by paying more than the actual value of the farm in consideration of its position, he should be enabled to sow its seeds and to reap its harvests the following year. Mr. Goldworthy had, however, jumped too readily to a conclusion; for he was totally and necessarily ignorant of the tenacious pride with which an old country gentleman clings to his ancestral acres, and how thoroughly they become in his eyes part and parcel of his personal dignity.

When the proposition of his new neighbour first reached Sir Hercules through his land-

steward, he was in a towering passion, and made several comments on the antecedents of the worthy manufacturer more energetic than complimentary; but as the subject was renewed year after year, and the baronet, who was a good-natured man at bottom, and always willing to look on the bright side of everything, had made the acquaintance of the persevering applicant, he contented himself by indulging in a laugh at his expense.

“I can quite understand, Saunders;” he said; “that Goldworthy would purchase the land as coolly as he would a new loom; but we attach a very different feeling to its possession. Tell him the Ashtons understand buying, but never sell. ’Gads my life! If there should be a rise in cotton goods it would not surprise me should he ask for the old Court next, with the reversion of the family vault. Pooh, pooh, nonsense; tell him not to make a fool of himself.”

“I shirk him when I can, Sir Hercules, for

if he catches me by the button I always know my fate."

"Pull the button off the next time you meet;" said the old gentleman chuckling; "and get away from the cotton-spinner."

And master and servant laughed at the joke, such as it was, most heartily.

The time had now come, however, when its point was lost. Even while coveting the farm as much as ever, Mr. Goldworthy had at length abandoned all hope of its possession, and contented himself by sighing very profoundly as he rode past the tempting homestead. It was his *tendon Achilles*—his *bête noire*—the one drop of gall in his overflowing cup of honey. He dreamt of it by night, and was haunted with it by day. He cared little for the quality of the land, but he pined to complete his ring-fence.

He had offered three thousand pounds for it beyond its actual value, and the relentless baronet was proof against even this golden

argument ; when, just as the possession of the farm had grown into so perfect an idiosyncrasy with poor Mr. Goldworthy that he resolved to offer an additional thousand rather than not carry his point, he was one morning surprised on meeting the steward of the baronet, while he was as usual prowling about his Hesperidian garden, to find that he made no attempt to avoid him.

“ Good morning, Mr. Saunders ;” he exclaimed, “ Fine weather for the crops.”

“ Good morning, Sir ; we want rain very much ; the young wheat is sadly parched up.”

“ Ah, true, true ; the young wheat ;” said the embryo farmer, looking very profound ; “ I had forgotten the young wheat. Yes, as you justly say, the young wheat is very much parched up.”

“ And the potatoes, Sir.”

“ Aye, to be sure, and the potatoes ; it will be a sad thing if we should not have a good crop of potatoes.”

“ I think these of Watson’s look more promising than any in the neighbourhood ;” said the steward, as he leant upon a gate near which they were standing, and looked lovingly over the stretch of luxuriant vegetation beyond ; “ but one thing is certain, that there ain’t a prettier nor a better bit of land in the whole county than the Willow Farm ; and so Watson allows himself.”

“ Yes, yes ; pretty enough, and good enough too, I dare say :” replied his companion rather snappishly ; “ but I wish, nevertheless, that it was anywhere but where it is.”

“ Now I can quite understand that feeling, sir ;” said Saunders sententially “ for it just does for your property what the cheesemonger does when he cuts the first pound or two out of a double-Gloucester—It makes an ugly gash.”

Poor Mr. Goldworthy groaned almost audibly.

“ You see it dont interfere one bit with *us* ;”

pursued his tormentor ; “ and that’s easily accounted for ; it was an after-purchase, and had nothing to do with the original estate. It was either the grandfather or the great-grandfather of Sir Hercules that took a fancy to it, but I’m sure I don’t know which.”

“ It matters very little ;” said his interlocutor, who in his annoyance determined to be as graphic as the steward himself ; “ for which ever of them it was, had about as much occasion for it as a man has for a wart upon his right hand.”

“ Well, maybe you’re right there too, sir ;” said Saunders placidly ; “ but it is wonderful how all these old country families do crave after land. Now, if I had been the baronet, I’m sure I shouldn’t have minded letting you have the farm, as you’ve such a fancy for it. You’re very good friends ; and it seems to me that it would have been neighbourly.”

“ And so it would, Saunders ; and so it would. Did you never happen to say as much to Sir Hercules ?”

“Why you see, sir, he’s not over easy to manage, so that I am obliged to mind my p’s and q’s; but I shouldn’t much care just venturing to offer him a bit of advice on the matter, if I was quite sure how he’d take it.”

“Now that would really be very obliging of you, Mr. Saunders, for you must of course have considerable influence with the old gentleman. I have already told you the sum that I am prepared to pay for the farm; and if you enable me to obtain it, you must allow me to add an odd hundred for yourself.”

“Many thanks, Sir, I’m sure; with my large family, I can’t afford to refuse so handsome an offer. Well, we must see what can be done; though I wish that it had been anything but land that you wanted. Your timber is coming on nicely, Mr. Goldworthy, in spite of the drought.”

“Why, yes;” replied his companion complacently, gratified by the term applied to his young trees, and flowering shrubs; “I hope

in a year or two to see a great change. More of my woods, you know; and less of my house."

"To be sure, sir, to be sure; and so you will as a matter of course. And now I must wish you good morning, sir, for I have to ride to one of the out-farms, and it's a good ten miles from the Court."

"Good morning, Mr. Saunders, good morning. You won't forget our little piece of business, eh?"

"No fear of that sir; no fear of that," said the astute steward as he turned away, delighted to have carried his point without compromising the dignity of his employer.

It is needless to say that Mr. Saunders ultimately prevailed upon the baronet to relinquish the Willow Farm, having received his instructions to that effect before his meeting with Mr. Goldworthy; but he was quite alive to the policy of appearing to confer a favor where he was, in point of fact, only yielding

to a necessity ; and thus the transaction, while it gratified the vanity of the new proprietor, saved the pride of the old one.

It was with a sharp pang, however, that Sir Hercules affixed his signature to the deed of transfer which legitimised the first dismemberment of his estate ; and he had some difficulty in forcing back the tears which sprung to his eyes as he took the pen into his hand. He was mortified to feel that he was the first Ashton upon record who had ever “ sold his birthright for a mess of pottage ;” but his only alternative that of felling the timber which was the admiration of the whole county, was not to be contemplated for an instant. He knew and loved every tree that overshadowed his wide acres ; they were, each and all, dear to him as old friends ; to him it would have been sacrilege to apply the axe to their gray trunks ; and consequently when Saunders, who was almost as reluctant as the baronet himself to part with

the Willow farm, ventured to suggest the great value of a certain score of oaks which he specified, nothing could exceed the indignation of Sir Hercules.

“Such a proposition from *you*, Saunders?” he exclaimed angrily; “from *you*, who should have the honor of our family at heart; whose father and grandfather were born on the estate! You know what it has cost me to make up my mind to sell the farm; although, except as a matter of feeling, the transfer is a most advantageous one; but to fell my timber—to wantonly destroy trees which have for centuries been respected by my ancestors—Do you think that the blood of the Ashtons has ceased to fill my veins? Not a stick shall be touched, sir, during my life-time, even were it possible that I saw myself compelled to part with my whole estate piece-meal.”

“I really beg your pardon, Sir Hercules.”

“And well you may. If you had no affection for the old trees, you should have

had too much pride to advise your master to point his own finger at his—Well, well ; you spoke without reflection ; you must have done so ; and now, all I have to request is, that you will not allow my son to suspect that I care one jot about the farm, for the poor lad is cut up enough already.”

The steward promised obedience ; and so resolutely did the baronet conceal his real feelings during the ultimate transaction, that although Horace watched him jealously, he could not detect a single symptom of reluctance or mortification. The proud old man bore up bravely under the honest and unrestrained self-gratulation of the exulting manufacturer, and the verbose comments of the men of law, who evidently considered the bargain a very profitable one for Sir Hercules, and of course looked no deeper ; but he heaved a sigh of relief as they left him to join Lady Harriette in the dining-room, where luncheon had been prepared for the party.

CHAPTER V.

AN APPEAL.

THE college debts of Horace Ashton were paid, and preparations for his contemplated journey were forthwith commenced. At the request of Lady Harriette (who had her own reasons for encouraging the visits of her son's friend), as well as by the express desire of the baronet, who was anxious to return the amount which had been more liberally than judiciously advanced by Hatherston, he was strongly urged to pass a few days at the Court before leaving England. The invitation was at once accepted, and would equally have been so had it proved much less pressing ; for the young

Cantab had never forgotten the bright eyes and glistening ringlets of Florence, and was as eager as Lady Harriette herself to find himself once more in her society.

The hint formerly thrown out by Horace of the charm which had enthralled his friend, was not lost upon the clever and careful mother ; who, under the pretext of the desire of herself and Sir Hercules to enjoy the companionship of their son until his departure without let or hindrance, courteously but resolutely declined entering into any engagements until he had left England ; a determination which caused no little annoyance to her daughters, who had become so habituated to gaiety and excitement, that their home had already ceased to be to them what it once was. Aware, however, that all expostulation would be useless, they submitted with as good a grace as they could assume ; and were ultimately reconciled to their temporary disappointment by a confidential communication vouchsafed to them,

and rendered necessary, as Lady Harriette was not slow to perceive, by the fact that considerable caution would be imperative on the part of Florence ; no small portion of the “unsophistication” which had won the admiration, if not as yet the love, of Frank Hatherston, having disappeared from the feelings and deportment of her eldest daughter.

Florence had been followed and flattered, it is true, but this was the first occasion upon which she had been justified in believing that she had become an object of serious attachment to any one ; and her young heart swelled with pride and pleasure as her mother poured into her willing ear her hopes and her exultation ; while Matilda, with whom her brother’s friend was a decided favourite, was delighted at the prospect of one day claiming him as a relative.

Accordingly, by common consent, all the vain trappings upon which poor Ella had laboured for so many weary hours were con-

signed to drawers and wardrobes, and the sisters resumed the simplicity of dress which rendered them so charming and attractive in the home-circle. Nor did Lady Harriette await the arrival of Hatherston to effect this change; it was made at once; while the neglected portfolios again appeared in her morning-room the piano was opened, the harp was uncovered, and a few of the novels with which her table was over-strewn, were replaced by volumes of history and travel.

Had not his niece appeared to have most suddenly and unaccountably neglected him, the baronet would at this period have been perfectly happy; for the sacrifice of the Willow Farm once made, he soon became reconciled to its loss; while the quiet and comfort of the household, which had latterly been so constantly disturbed, soothed him into greater composure; and enabled him to bear with less irritation than he had exhibited for some time

past, the painful attacks of his pertinacious enemy. He was now never awakened during "the small hours" by the return of the family coach with its worn and jaded occupants ; the ringing of bells, and heavy tread of half-sleeping servants ; his daughters joined his breakfast-table without either headaches or weariness ; while Lady Harriette was radiant, and his son full of devotion and gratitude.

"But where on earth is Ella?" was for ever on his lips.

"My dear Sir Hercules ;" said his wife on one occasion ; "I informed your niece, as you requested that I would do, how sincerely grieved you had been to find that her close attendance in your sick room had been prejudicial to her health ; and desired her in future to be guided entirely by her own feelings. If I did wrong in this, you have only to say so, and I will direct her to return."

"No, no ; you have acted most judiciously ;" said the baronet, as he stroked down his swol-

len and burning leg with a gesture of impatience and annoyance which he could not conceal ; “ I dare say the poor girl feels that she wants rest to recruit her health and spirits ; and that when she has done so, she will prove to us both that she did not mean to abandon her old uncle.”

“ I have no doubt that such will be the case ;” said Lady Harriette with a peculiar smile.

“ Still, I must confess ;” continued Sir Hercules ; “ that I should have liked to see her beside me, if it had only been for half-an-hour in the day, for I have become so accustomed to her presence, and so dependant on her care and affection, that I miss her sadly.”

“ But surely Brooks and Andrews——”

“ Brooks and Andrews do their best, my dear ; but the old woman’s hand is not so light or so skilful as Ella’s ; and Andrews drones over the newspaper like a Scotch bagpipe. However, I ought not to complain ; and I do not.”

“Why not let one of the girls read to you?”

“Because it wearies them, and when I see that it does so, it makes me unhappy and irritable. They have greater spirits than Ella, and consequently feel the restraint and confinement even more than she does.”

“I am quite sure, nevertheless;” said Lady Harriette; “that they are both equally ready to make any sacrifice which may conduce to your comfort.”

“But I do not wish them to sacrifice themselves to me;” was the querulous reply; “they are not suited to a sick room, poor things! and, very naturally, do not like it.”

“Really, Sir Hercules, one would imagine——”

“Imagine nothing, my dear, except what I have said. I find no fault with the girls; they are young, and are not to blame if they have not the quiet tastes and habits of their cousin.”

“It would, however, appear that your niece is not altogether wedded to those tastes and

habits which rendered her so eligible a companion to you in your sufferings ; for this is now, I think, the fifth day since she has entered your room ; and she must have been aware—”

As Lady Harriette was speaking a servant entered the room with a letter, which he presented to his master.

“ Is any one waiting for an answer ? ” enquired Lady Harriette, aware that it was not the post hour.

“ No, my lady ; I believe the note is from Miss Ella.”

“ From Miss Ella ! ” echoed the baronet ; “ Impossible ! Had my niece desired to communicate with me, she had only to come to my room.”

“ But you must remember, Sir Hercules ; ” said Lady Harriette, who was not altogether without anxiety as to the purport of the letter ; “ that she is somewhat peculiar in her notions.”

The baronet made no reply, as he proceeded to break the seal ; while his wife, who never

for a moment doubted that the orphan had written to expostulate on her exclusion from his apartment, was already revolving in her own mind how she should extricate herself from this new difficulty.

Her suspense was, however, soon terminated by an indignant and angry exclamation from Sir Hercules ; who, dashing his spectacles upon the table, fixed his eyes stedfastly upon her as he asked : “ What can this mean, my lady ? Here is my brother’s child, who is as dear to me as my own, and to whom I have vowed to myself to feel and act as a parent, actually urging me to allow her to leave my roof, and to go out into the world as a governess ! The only daughter of my only brother—an Ashton—why the idea is monstrous ! ”

“ I remarked an instant ago that she was very peculiar ; ” said Lady Harriette, singularly relieved on finding that Ella had made no complaint ; “ but depend on what I tell you, Sir Hercules, the request is only intended to

extort from you an assurance that you cannot do without her.”

“Extort from me such an assurance, did you say? There exists no reason why she should attempt to extort it ;” was the angry rejoinder ; “I am ready enough to make the admission, for there is not an hour in the day that I do not regret her absence. Moreover, she has been thoroughly in earnest when she wrote that letter. You had better read it, however, and judge for yourself.”

Lady Harriette extended her hand with a smile that was at once sarcastic and satisfied ; and read as follows :—

“MY VERY DEAR UNCLE,

“In the request which I am about to make, I feel convinced that you will absolve me from all want of affection towards yourself. I do indeed most earnestly and gratefully thank you for your unwearying kindness and indulgence to a poor orphan, wholly depend-

ant upon your goodness and generosity. But I am no longer a child ; and the unfortunate circumstances in which I am placed have tended to age me even beyond my years. I have—or at least I trust so—profited by the education for which I am indebted to your liberality ; and having for several months seriously reflected on my position, I have now deliberately come to the resolution of entreating that you will allow me to derive from it the means of personal independence. I have been informed by Madame Despreaux that Lady Harriette Ashton had successfully exerted her influence to procure for her in the family of a friend the same situation which she has so long filled under your roof ; but as she has resolved to abandon the duties of tuition, and for the future to reside with her relatives, it has struck me that I might perhaps be permitted to supply her place, were it only for a time, until Lady Brambledyke could secure a more competent instructress ; as even

a temporary residence under her ladyship's roof could not fail to be an eligible introduction to some more permanent engagement. I do not wish to conceal, my dear uncle, the feeling of unfeigned regret with which I shall part from you ; but I think that my path of duty lies broad before me, and that it is now time that I should relieve you from the burden of my maintenance.

“ Hoping that you will accede to my request, and assuring you that under whatever circumstances I may be placed, I will be careful never to do discredit either to your kindness or to the name I bear,

“ I respectfully subscribe myself, my dear uncle, your affectionate and grateful

“ ELLA.”

“ Very romantic indeed !” exclaimed Lady Harriette as she concluded the letter ; “ but certainly not equally judicious or considerate. In the first place, in her anxiety to emancipate

herself from the authority of her relatives, Miss Ella Ashton appears to have forgotten, or to have wilfully overlooked, the fact that her becoming the hired dependant of strangers *must*, as a natural consequence, disgrace the name she bears ; and in the next, it appears equally to have escaped her memory, that after having been for so many years indebted to her family for their protection, it is scarcely becoming in her to reject their further aid at an age when she might be in some degree enabled to repay the debt. I consider this letter as most selfish and insulting, Sir Hercules."

"I confess that I cannot look upon it in that light, my dear ;" said the baronet ; " but that, on the contrary, I feel a respect for the motive by which it was dictated ; although, understand at the same time that I decidedly refuse to comply with any such proposition. The poor child has already more than repaid me for any kindness that I have shewn her, and to which under any circumstances she had,

moreover, a right ; and she must be made to comprehend this. Many a paroxysm of agony, many an hour of weariness has she soothed for me ; and I will not permit her to believe that we are ungrateful. Poor sensitive young creature ! She will find her struggle with the world begin too soon come when it may, and she shall not hasten its commencement."

"But she must be mad ;" was the sneering reply of Lady Harriette ; "to suppose that *she*, with her imperfect education, to say nothing of her youth, could undertake such a situation as that of the countess. I can scarcely credit such presumption. Why, even one of our own girls, with their superior advantages, could never have sufficed, had it been necessary for them to make the trial, to finish Lady Ann Trevethic."

"Superior advantages?" echoed the baronet ; "to what advantages can you allude ? I always understood that the three cousins were educated together."

“And so they were, of course ;” said his wife somewhat disconcerted by her own want of caution, and closing her thin lips tightly together ; “but you forget, my dear Sir Hercules, that Florence and Matilda had been under the care of madame for three years before the arrival of your niece.”

“True, true ;” replied the old gentleman ; “and such being the case, I consider it but just to retain the services of that admirable woman until Ella is placed in the same position as our own girls. Be good enough therefore to offer my compliments to Madame Despreaux, and to tell her that if she can so far oblige me without inconvenience to herself, I shall esteem it a favour if she will consent to remain in my family until she considers that my niece no longer requires her assistance.”

“I will at once explain your wishes to her, Sir Hercules ;” said Lady Harriette, as she rose and left the room with a smile of disdainful determination playing about her mouth.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SILVER CORD BROKEN.

OF course the message was so delivered to the Frenchwoman, that, even desirous as she was not to be separated from the orphan, she felt that her self-respect must be compromised should she accede to the request of Sir Hercules; while, equally of course, he was informed by Lady Harriette that Madame Despreaux had civilly but firmly declined to retain her situation, on the plea that she had already made the necessary arrangements to reside in future with her relatives: "And it must be admitted;" she said in conclusion, as she reported her ill-success to the baronet; "that, after so many years devoted to tuition, she

has well-earned the repose for which she is now naturally anxious."

The old gentleman heaved a sigh of disappointment; and after the pause of a moment asked tremulously: "Did you inform Ella that she must abandon her project?"

"I requested madame to do so."

"And what was the result?"

"Simply that your niece would obey you, but that she did it very reluctantly."

"Poor girl! Poor girl!" said the invalid; "She meant to do right; of that I am perfectly convinced; but she could form no correct estimate of the struggle which she was so willing to encounter. She will understand it better some time hence. And now, my dear, send her to me; and I will soon convince her that this is her proper home."

Lady Harriette triumphed, for she began to comprehend the character of her victim, and to feel convinced that, suffer as she might, Ella would never condescend to com-

plain; and she was right; for even when, during the interview which ensued, the invalid reproached his gentle nurse for her late absence from his sick room, she bore his reproof in silence, keenly as she felt it; and never alluded to the prohibition by which it had been induced. To one resolution she, however, came upon the instant, and that was to resume, without comment of any kind, her attendance upon her uncle, to the great but unexpressed satisfaction of Lady Harriette, who, on her side, appeared unconscious of this act of rebellion, which had, as we need scarcely say, been precisely the result that she had been anxious to effect.

Mrs. Brooks was quietly released from her new duties, and gladly returned to her throne in the housekeeper's room; while Andrews as joyfully resumed his more congenial duties in the pantry.

Thus far all went well, and Ella divided her time between her uncle and Madame Des-

preaux, until the day arrived on which the latter bade farewell to Ashton Court. The separation from her attached and devoted ayah had been a severe trial to the orphan, and she had mourned for her with all the vehement grief of early youth; now, however, her sorrow was far more deep and less demonstrative. She had progressed rapidly from the girl to the woman; she had learnt to think as well as to feel; to appreciate the depth of the precipice to whose brink she had been forced by injustice and unkindness; and to cling tenaciously to every help by which her footsteps were steadied. Of these the firmest was the warm-hearted Frenchwoman, and upon her she poured out accordingly the warmest affection of her earnest nature. She loved her uncle, and her gratitude towards him was unbounded, but she had long learnt to comprehend his yielding and unstable character; to her cousins she had clung with a sister's tenderness and trust, until she saw her trust violated and her

tenderness repulsed; on Horace she had a conviction that she might safely rely, though how that conviction had grown upon her she could not have explained even to herself; but Horace was about to leave his country for months, probably for years; and there remained to her only Madame Despreaux, when the last blow was given to her happiness by the stern and relentless will of the obdurate Lady Harriette.

We will not dwell upon their parting; suffice it that neither of them sought their bed on the previous night, which they spent in tears and endearments. The judicious advice of her excellent instructress sank deep into the spirit of the orphan, who promised to bear all the tyranny of her aunt for the sake of the suffering invalid to whom her presence and services had become essential; and when he should be taken from his family, to hasten at once to the modest home of her companion, and to "be unto her as a daughter."

Even this uncertain prospect of rest and love was cheering to the crushed spirit of Ella, but still there was a weary weight of woe at her heart; a woe which she was only too well aware would meet with neither sympathy nor indulgence; and as the sounds of reawakening life became audible within the mansion, she commenced her task of self-government by dashing the tears from her eyes, and smoothing the disordered hair which had for so many hours hung dank and disregarded over her cheeks and brow.

As Madame Despreaux had taken leave of all the other members of the family on the preceding evening, intending to commence her journey at an early hour, the two friends, when summoned by a sleepy housemaid, descended to the breakfast-room with their hands locked together, to go through the ceremony of sharing the morning meal; and both started with surprise on perceiving that Horace had already preceded them.

“ I have to apologise for this intrusion ;” he said, as forcing a smile he extended a hand to each ; “ but I have a double duty to fulfil—in the first place to express to Madame Despreaux the sincere gratitude of those whom she is about to quit, for all the valuable services which she has rendered to my sisters, and to satisfy myself that to the last moment of her sojourn under our roof she is treated with the attention and respect to which she is so justly entitled ; and in the next to fulfil a commission with which I have been entrusted by Sir Hercules. Here, Madame, is a letter which I promised to deliver into your own hands.”

The Frenchwoman received the packet, and warmly expressed her acknowledgments for the courtesy of the young man, whom she had only a moment before looked upon in the light of an unwelcome intruder, who would rob her of her last half hour of confidential communication with Ella ; while the latter had

already seated herself, and was preparing to preside at the melancholy meal ; an office in which her cousin, who had also approached the table, was about to assist her, when their attention was attracted by a faint exclamation from Madame Despreaux, immediately succeeded by a violent burst of tears.

In an instant both were at her side, and the arms of Ella clasped about her neck.

“What new sorrow has been reserved for you, my beloved friend?” she gasped out ; “Are you to have no memories of this house save those of bitterness and insult ?”

“Oh, it is too, too much ;” sobbed the excited woman ; “I did not expect this—I could not—what have I done to deserve it ?”

“Surely,” exclaimed Horace ; “my father has never——”

“He has—he has——” was the hysterical reply ; “I care not for the money, though my heart is very grateful ; but these kind, kind words.—Oh, Ella, I will not fear for you, my

child, while Sir Hercules loves you. He says that he regrets my departure ; that he shall always regret it ; that he will ever be my friend should I need one ; that—oh, it is too much, too much ;” and she clasped her hands in uncontrollable emotion as the munificent cheque of the baronet fell unheeded upon the carpet.

“My noble, excellent uncle !” murmured the orphan ; while Horace turned away to conceal how much he was moved by the enthusiastic gratitude and pride of the long humbled, but now exulting Frenchwoman.

As soon as the little party had become more calm, an abortive attempt was made by all to partake of the food before them ; but as they soon became convinced of their inability to do so, each swallowed a cup of tea in silence ; and then, having entreated Ella to assure her uncle that she would preserve his precious letter to the last hour of her existence, Madame Despreaux hastily began to arrange her

travelling-dress, like one whose fortitude had almost given way ; while poor Ella, with tearless eyes and quivering lips, remained seated with her gaze rivetted upon her motions.

“The family coach will convey you to the post-town, madame ;” said Horace with studied respect ; “if you will do Sir Hercules the honour to make use of it ; and I shall esteem it a great favour if you will allow me to accompany you so far on your way, and to see you comfortably seated in the mail.”

The governess burst into tears.

“Ella, my child ;” she said almost inarticulately ; “You will speak for me—you will understand what I feel—I shall not leave you like one sent from the house of good Sir Hercules, a discarded menial ; I shall forget much, very much, *all* that I have——No, no ; that is not what I meant ; I shall say no more—*le cœur m’étouffe.—Je suis trop impressionnée pour m’expliquer—* ;” and then, with a smothered sob she extended her arms to the

orphan, who threw herself wildly upon her bosom.

Horace had left the room ; and while the two friends were weeping out their last parting words, he desired the postillion who drove the chaise which madame had ordered for her own conveyance, to proceed at once with her luggage, to its destination, and to see it carefully packed on the mail ; and when she finally rushed into the hall, and thence to the portico, he silently assisted her into the carriage, where she flung herself into a corner with her thick veil drawn closely over her face ; stepped in after her ; and in a quarter of an hour the amiable Frenchwoman had passed the gates of Ashton park, as she believed for ever.

CHAPTER VII.

HARMONY AND DISCORD.

POOR Ella! She was bereaved indeed: and time, far from reconciling her to the absence of her devoted and judicious friend, appeared only to enhance the bitterness of her loss. She had no warm heart now upon which she could weep out her sorrows; no soothing words to strengthen her in her daily trials; no gentle voice to whisper hope where all was darkness; she was alone in heart; and at her age such solitude is fearful.

Horace it is true had not yet left home, where he was still awaiting the arrival of his friend; but Lady Harriette manœuvred so

cleverly to keep the cousins apart, that they met only beside the gouty chair of the baronet ; who, delighted to find himself once more tended by his niece, soon forgot all his scruples, and became more exacting than ever. A cold invitation had, indeed, been given to Ella to join the family at their repasts ; but it was uttered in such a tone, and with such a look, that she was glad to plead her desire to remain with her uncle when her services were so essential to him, in order to avoid the after-consequences of compliance ; and, accordingly, "Miss Ella Ashton's tray" was regularly taken to the schoolroom by one of the under-housemaids ; and remained there, whatever might be the nature of its contents, until she found time or courage to make her solitary meal.

Need we say that her thoughts, when she had leisure to indulge them, dwelt constantly on her lost friend ; or that she occasionally wept bitterly over the refusal with which her plan of personal independence had been met ?

What, she asked herself, had she in truth become under her uncle's roof? A menial without a menial's hire. And was she not consequently in a position of more positive servitude than that of a governess? Yes, poor girl! there could be no doubt that such was the case; but even while it was so, she was herself the only sufferer. She did not disgrace *her family* by receiving the honest wages of industry; and, consequently, that fact being unknown to the world, did not ruffle the nerves of Lady Harriette's pride; who, when at a loss for a better subject of conversation with her daughters, constantly recurred with a bitter sneer to the presumption of the half-educated girl, who had unblushingly declared herself ready to undertake a responsibility so great as that of the education of five young ladies of rank and fashion!

"I rather imagine however, mamma; said Florence on one occasion; "that you are quite in error as to Ella's capabilities; for,

conscious of course that she could never hope to move in the same sphere as Matilda and myself, she applied a great deal more steadily than I fear we did to her studies ; and you must remember that we had been introduced into society for several months before the departure of madame ; who was so partial to Ella, that I am quite convinced she spared no pains with her to the last."

"And *you* must remember, Miss Ashton ;" was the sharp retort ; "that yourself and your sister had the benefit of your numerous masters for many months after I had declined their further attendance on your cousin."

"What can you mean, mamma?" asked Matilda.

"Precisely what I say. For nine or ten months before they finally took their leave of Ashton Court, they attended here solely for my daughters."

"Then indeed, mamma, you are very much mistaken if you suppose so, for I can assure

you that Ella never missed a lesson to the last."

"Impossible !" exclaimed Lady Harriette ; " Men whose time is their income, would scarcely be Quixotic enough to waste it upon a poor dependant like your cousin ; and I can seriously assure you that I never paid a guinea on her account from the period I have mentioned."

" Nevertheless, mamma, what Matilda has told you is perfectly correct ;" said the elder sister ; " the only perceptible difference made between us being, that while several of the gentlemen scrupulously laid their watches on the table before them while we took our lessons, as though determined not to outstay their hour, they never cast a glance at them when Ella's were in question."

" And, pray, why was I not informed of this circumstance at the time ?"

" We did not know that you had given any such orders, mamma."

“True ;” said Lady Harriette, pinching her thin lips together to keep down her wrath ; “but I should much like to know who was guilty of the impertinence of laying any member of Sir Hercules Ashton’s family under an obligation to such persons ! Miss Ella, it would appear, is capable of more insolence than even I gave her credit for.”

“Perhaps Ella was not aware of the circumstance”—ventured Matilda.

“Nonsense, child !” was the angry rejoinder ; “It is impossible that she could have been ignorant of my determination ; and she has therefore shamefully, and deliberately degraded herself by accepting favours which she can never cancel—Unless indeed :” she suddenly added ; “she has induced your father—and I believe her to be artful enough for anything—to pay her masters unknown to me. In either case her conduct has been monstrous ! There is nothing that I loathe and despise like treachery.”

The girls glanced at each other in astonishment.

“ I see your look of surprise ; ” pursued the irate lady, turning sharply upon them ; “ and I find that it will be necessary to explain the cause of my displeasure ; although surely you must be obtuse indeed not to understand at once that I had sufficient pride in my daughters to secure them, if it were in my power, against all rivalry from a needy relative ; but my children never do, and I fear never will, appreciate all the exertions and sacrifices which I make for their benefit.”

“ I am sure, mamma—”

“ You are sure of nothing, Miss Ashton ; while I have the certainty that should either of your own acquirements, or those of your sister be measured against the success of this plodding and pains-taking girl, you will have no reason to congratulate yourselves on the result. I can understand now that the surprise and gratification which I have occasionally felt,

when after an evening of gaiety and fatigue which must, as I apprehended, have compelled you both to spend half the ensuing morning in sleep, I have been startled by the sounds of music issuing from the school-room—I can now understand, I repeat, that it was to Miss Ella Ashton that I was indebted for my early serenade; and again I say that it is monstrous! I am evidently no match for the cunning of your very persevering and clever cousin; and am, despite all my efforts to render such a project abortive, to have the mortification of acknowledging that I can claim no superiority in any way for *my* daughters, where their success has depended on their own exertions.”

How much longer this conversation, sufficiently unpleasant as it was for all parties, might have continued, it is impossible to say, as it was terminated at this particular moment by the entrance of Horace; who announced the arrival of his friend, coupled with the in-

formation that he had gone to his room to rid himself of the dust and disarray of his rapid journey, before he ventured into the presence of the ladies.

In an instant the brow of Lady Harriette became as serene as a summer sky ; while her thin, and hitherto compressed lips parted with a smile of unmistakeable satisfaction. She first glanced hurriedly at Florence, and then round the apartment ; and neither in the aspect of the one or the other did she find anything to ruffle her newly-acquired composure. Nor was she likely to do so after the precautions which she had taken ; but she was too good a general not to make sure of her ground before the eventful moment for which she had long been anxious should arrive.

“ I am afraid that I am almost jealous of Frank ;” pursued the young heir of Ashton, with an evident gratification which belied his words ; “ for during the few months that we have been separated he has become one of

the finest and most manly-looking fellows I ever saw. You will scarcely know him. So, girls, I warn you to take care of your hearts, for I can assure you that they are in some danger."

"Nonsense, Horace ;" said Lady Harriette evidently as well-pleased as her son ; "surely your college friend may be an inmate of Ashton Court without endangering the good sense of your sisters. I must have no folly of this sort, or I shall hasten your departure in order to put an end to it."

"I am quite ready to start ;" was the arch retort of the young man ; "say but the word therefore, *madre mia*, and we will at once secure our places in the mail."

"Have you informed your father of Mr. Hatherston's arrival ?" asked his mother, vouchsafing no reply to the saucy challenge.

"I endeavoured to do so, but found the good old gentleman fast asleep."

"Was your cousin with him ?"

“She was not ; but had evidently not been long absent, as her work still occupied the table.”

“Her zeal for her uncle does not appear to keep her very stringently at her post ;” said Lady Harriette with a sneer ; “It is, as she well knows, precisely when Sir Hercules wakes that he most requires her presence. Pull the bell, Horace.”

“If it be to summon Ella, my dear mother ;” replied her son ; “it is needless, as I heard her at her harp when I accompanied Frank to his room ; and can tell her that you wish to speak to her on my way to my own.”

“Go at once then ;” was the impatient rejoinder : “I must see her immediately.”

“One kiss from the girls, and I’m off ;” said the young man as he affectionately embraced his sisters ere he left the room.

“You hear, young ladies ;” observed their mother with stern significance ; “Mr. Hatherston is in his room, and Miss Ella Ashton is at

her harp in the same gallery. Of course every one in the house is quite aware of his arrival ; but I shall say no more upon the subject. What with want of proper dignity on the one hand, and impertinent assumption on the other, I have little hope of a favourable result to any view or wish of my own."

"This is scarcely fair towards Matilda and myself, mamma ;" said Florence, bursting into tears ; "Surely we are not to blame because Ella went to practise while papa was asleep."

"Admirable, Miss Ashton!" exclaimed Lady Harriette angrily ; "there was nothing more wanted than that when Mr. Hatherston first sees you, it should be with red eyes and swollen lips, blubbering like a whipped school-girl. Pray do not restrain your tears on my account. Let your brother's friend have the advantage of them ; they cannot fail to render your appearance highly prepossessing."

Poor Florence sobbed on in silence.

"Leave the room, and keep yourself out of

sight until I send for you. Your conduct is disgraceful!" was the next exclamation of the mortified mother; "I must endeavour to conceal your folly if you have not the necessary self-respect to hide it yourself."

Thus admonished her daughter glided from the room; and she had scarcely done so when the two young men entered.

Warm greetings were exchanged between the hostess and her guest; who had indeed, as Horace had declared, grown into a fine noble-looking youth, rapidly maturing into manhood.

"I make no enquiry for Miss Ashton;" he said with a bright smile, as he retained the hand of Matilda in his own; "for although I have not yet had the happiness of seeing her, I have at least had that of listening to one of the sweetest voices, and most admirable musicians that I should think the whole of England can produce; and I should, indeed, long ere this have made my bow to your ladyship, had

I possessed courage to emancipate myself from the thrall of the syren by whom I was spell-bound."

A slight flush suffused itself over the cheek and brow of Lady Harriette, as she bowed and strove to smile; but she did not utter a syllable to undeceive the enthusiastic speaker.

"Of all luxuries in the world;" pursued Frank; "to me there is nothing like music; and where it is carried to perfection, as in the case of Miss Ashton, it is the unerring index of a pure and refined mind."

A spark shot from the eye of Lady Harriette as cold and as keen as steel; but she only smiled again, and remained silent.

"I do not know how Horace may feel;" resumed Hatherston with considerable emphasis; "but I fear that I shall be pursued throughout my wanderings with a 'homesickness' not very creditable to my character as a traveller. An Englishman leaves so much to regret when he exiles himself from his

country even for a year or two, that the marvel to me is how this pilgrim-passion has grown upon us all."

"But why leave the country at all if such are your sentiments?" asked his hostess, unguardedly ; "you are in no position to render such a step necessary."

"I do so, because I consider it essential to the education of a gentleman that he should learn how properly to appreciate the land of his birth, by fairly, and from personal experience, enabling himself to contrast it with other nations ; and I am convinced that your ladyship will agree with me, that our countrymen, perhaps more than any other people, require to mix with foreigners, in order to divest themselves of a host of narrow prejudices and misconceptions. John Bull is an honest fellow at bottom, but he is apt to make strange mistakes as regards his neighbours ; not from cold-heartedness, but from wrong-headedness ; and, individually, one would be glad to escape the blunder."

“And I beg to add ;” broke in Horace ; “that rejoiced as I shall be on my return to find myself once more in the bosom of my family, I by no means wish that Frank should turn sentimentalist, and baulk me of my promised tour. Besides think, Matty, of all that you would lose — corals from Marseilles, mosaics from Venice, cameos from Rome, and turquoises from Constantinople ! Do you not agree with me that idle young gentlemen cannot better employ their time than in collecting all these pretty baubles for their mothers and sisters ?”

“Not forgetting their aunts and cousins, I trust ;” laughed Matilda ; “provided you do not stay too long away, I for one, highly applaud your scheme : to say nothing of the annoyance of papa were you to interfere with his plans.”

“Nor would *my* uncle be less disappointed ;” said Hatherston ; “should his darling project be thwarted by any weakness on my part ;

and it really does appear absurd and inconsistent that the very thing for which one has been pining for years should become distasteful at the moment when it is within one's grasp."

"Whimsical enough, certainly ;" said Horace laughing ; "and if you are likely to be troubled with many such attacks, it strikes me that the wandering Telemachus of Ashton Court had better look out for another Mentor."

Hatherston smiled and blushed, for he felt that the eye of Lady Harriette was upon him ; but after the pause of an instant he replied in the same tone—"Never fear, Horry ; when we have once started, I shall be as resolute a traveller as yourself ; it is only the leave-taking that unsettles me. The old story, you may remember, that we know what we quit, and can only guess at what we go to find."

The heart of Lady Harriette beat high.

What but a growing affection for Florence could render a separation from mere friends, and that too only for a time, painful to the feelings of Frank? That this separation, however, should take place as speedily as possible she at once resolved, ere Hatherston had an opportunity of discovering his mistake with regard to the unseen musician. Florence was so beautiful, so graceful, and so perfectly aware of the tastes and predilections of her brother's friend, that could she effect this object the wily mother had little doubt of a successful issue to her hopes. The first object of her anxiety was, consequently, to keep Ella out of sight, and to discover some pretext for preventing all further practising until after the departure of the young men. Full of her project, she accordingly soon afterwards left the room; and, having ascertained that her niece was not with Sir Hercules, she slowly ascended the stairs, maturing her plan as she went. It was at once simple and effective. With a host of

elaborate apologies she requested, as a personal favour, that Miss Ella Ashton would so far oblige her as to undertake the making of a dress which she was really afraid of entrusting to Mademoiselle Sophie, who had grown unaccountably careless of late ; particularly as she required it as soon as it could possibly be completed. She was, of course, perfectly aware that in asking this she was trespassing on the good nature of her niece ; but she felt convinced that under the circumstances she could not be refused.

Coldly, but without the slightest symptom of reluctance, Ella at once expressed her readiness to comply with the request ; and within half-an-hour she was seated in the solitary school-room busily engaged with her needle, and with no companionship save that of her own sad thoughts.

On the following morning she rose at day-break in order to pass an hour or two in her musical studies before she resumed her mono-

tonous task, but to her wonder and dismay she discovered that the harp had been removed, and the piano locked. With a sigh of disappointment she turned away, full of wonder at this new and inexplicable arrangement, and strove to overcome her regret by increased application to her wearisome employment ; but more than one sigh escaped her as she could not conceal from herself that this severe privation could be attributable only to some new persecution on the part of Lady Harriette.

CHAPTER VIII.

A TORN COBWEB.

SEVERAL days passed by, and the orphan still remained invisible, while the enquiries of the baronet and his son were met by the reply that she was somewhat seriously indisposed, and kept her room; a piece of information which of course precluded the possibility of any attempt on the part of Horace to seek her in her usual haunts. The girls, who had received a hint from their mother upon the subject, and who were, moreover, too fully occupied in riding, walking, and playing billiards with their brother and his friend to have much leisure to waste upon their cousin,

returned vague and cold answers to the questioning of Horace, who, just on the eve of departure, was doubly annoyed to be deprived of her society. By some strange chance, also, the key of the piano had been mislaid, and as Florence was tuning the harp one of the strings flew, and there was not another in the house to replace it. Hatherston volunteered to gallop over to the post-town to procure a substitute, a piece of gallantry for which he was warmly and graciously thanked by Lady Harriette; who however expressed her regret that the errand would be fruitless, as she was always compelled to send to town for harp strings when their supply was exhausted.

“You see therefore, young people;” she said cheerfully; “that you must amuse yourselves as well as you can without music. It is unfortunate certainly, but as your very hours at Ashton Court are now numbered, the privation will only be a short one.”

“I may at least hope, may I not, my dear

madam, that Miss Ashton will be kind enough to let me hear her voice once more before we leave?" urged Hatherston.

"Sorry as I am to refuse what appears to be so very simple a request, I regret to say that I *must* do so;" replied the lady blandly; "her singing-master having strictly enjoined me not to allow her to sing without accompaniment, lest at so early an age she should break her voice; and Florence knows that she must not disobey my wishes."

The young man was of course silenced, if not satisfied; and strove in the smiles of the beautiful girl, whose flushing cheek and drooping eye rendered her doubly attractive, to compensate himself for his disappointment. Moreover, Florence was invested with a new charm, and one which spoke directly to his heart, in the sick-room of her father; where, by Lady Harriette's desire, she now replaced the absent Ella. Matilda, as she declared to her guest, was too young and giddy for a

nurse, while Florence, with her gentle manner and her low voice seemed peculiarly adapted to attend upon an invalid. Hatherston perfectly agreed in this opinion; and as he watched the gliding and noiseless step, and listened to the soft accents of Miss Ashton, he began to understand that such tendance could convert even illness itself into a luxury.

Sir Hercules, however, although he uttered no complaint, and was really grateful for this new and affectionate zeal on the part of his beautiful daughter, soon discovered that it was not with her, as with Ella, a labour of love; for there were many moments when Florence, left alone with him, did not even attempt to conceal her weariness; whereas the orphan, conscious that she was sincerely loved by her uncle, upon whom alone she could pour forth her answering affection, was indefatigable in administering to his comfort and amusement.

On the morning of the day which had been fixed for the departure of the two young men

Hatherston rose with the dawn, resolved to wander once more over the grounds, and to visit for the last time for many months the favorite haunts of Florence, in order that during his absence he might be enabled not only to recall her own sweet countenance and graceful form, but also to surround her with all the familiar objects which served to enhance her loveliness.

Gently opening the door of his room that he might not disturb the family, he accordingly passed into the gallery; deliberating with himself if, on the possible, but certainly not probable, event of his meeting with Miss Ashton before his return to the house, he should venture to declare to her how thoroughly he had become the slave of her beauty and her numerous amiable qualities. That his suit would not be rejected by either of her parents he felt convinced; but, like every lover, he doubted that which he most desired; and did not suffer himself to imagine that a creature

so perfect as Florence could easily be won to bestow herself upon him. He could not conceal from himself that, once assured of her affection, the pang of separation would become tenfold more bitter; but how much worse, he argued, would it be to remain in suspense upon such a subject for an indefinite period, only perhaps to find on his return that the boon which he coveted had, during his absence, been bestowed upon another! Then came a sensation of wonder that he should have waited until the last moment to ascertain a fact so important to the happiness of his future life; and he had just finally determined that he would not leave Ashton Court, without eliciting the sentiments of his fair enslaver, when a gush of song, so wild, so sweet, and so wondrously melodious, burst upon his ear, that he stood for a moment transfixed with astonishment and delight.

“She loves me!” he murmured beneath his breath: the lovely, the gentle, the guileless

Florence Ashton loves me ; or so affectionate and obedient a daughter would never thus act in opposition to her mother's will. Kind and generous girl ! How will I pay her back this proof of self-sacrifice !”

We have already stated that the school-room was situated in the same gallery as the apartments occupied by Horace and his friend ; although, being at one of its extremities, it was approached by an inferior staircase which prevented all contact between the guests who were staying in the house, and those of its inmates whose avocations still caused them to frequent it. Of these circumstances Hatherston was necessarily aware ; and, resolved not to lose so favorable and unhopd-for an opportunity of pouring out his whole heart to the beautiful songstress, he rushed impetuously forward, and was in the centre of the room ere the parted lips whence the flood of harmony had issued had time to close.

Great, however, was his amazement to find

that he had intruded on the privacy, not of Miss Ashton, but, as he imagined at the moment, of a perfect stranger. As he had sprung towards her, the lady had risen from her chair, and for several instants the two stood silently face to face ; Frank utterly unable from embarrassment to articulate a sentence, and Ella with downcast eyes and blushing cheek, scarcely less confused than himself.

“I beg ten thousand pardons, madam ;” at length stammered the young man ; “I shall never forgive myself—I—I expected to find Miss Ashton here.”

“I regret your disappointment, sir ;” said the orphan with cold courtesy ; “the hour is too early for my cousin ; who, moreover, very rarely visits this room.”

“Have I then the honour of addressing Miss Ella Ashton ?” asked Hatherston, more and more bewildered ; “I trust that, should such be the case, you have entirely recovered from your indisposition.”

A scornful smile played for an instant about the mouth of the orphan, as she quietly thanked him for his solicitude, needless as it was; assuring him that for many months she had been in perfect health.

“And yet—” said Frank, gazing about him with a wondering curiosity which was betrayed on his intelligent countenance; “I was assured——”

“Pardon me;” interposed Ella with dignity; “There has apparently been some mistake, which I would rather should remain unexplained.”

“Mistake, indeed!” echoed the young man, with another long look round the room which seemed to take in every object that it contained; “Only say, Miss Ashton, that you will pardon my involuntary rudeness;” and as he spoke he extended his hand; “For the sake of our past acquaintance I entreat you to forgive and to forget it. I am Frank Hatherston. May I hope that you still remember me?”

“Perfectly,” said Ella, placing her small hand in his; “and there is really so little either to forget or to forgive that I beg you not to dwell upon it for an instant; but to believe me when I assure you that I am pleased to have this opportunity of offering my best wishes both to yourself and my cousin before your departure.”

“Why then have you——” commenced Frank.

“Not a word on any other subject, Mr. Hatherston;” said the orphan; “I am very glad to have seen you; and now you must excuse me if I venture to suggest that this is neither the hour nor the place for a more prolonged interview. Be good enough to tell my cousin Horace that no one will rejoice more sincerely than myself to see him return well and happy.”

“I will do your bidding, Miss Ashton;” was the respectful reply; “if indeed——” he paused, bowed low before her, and left the room.

The morning walk was abandoned. The feelings of the young man had undergone a strange revulsion. He had not met the orphan for more than two years, and we have already said how greatly time had changed her. For awhile he could think of nothing but her extraordinary and stately beauty, and her miraculous musical proficiency; but by slow degrees he began to ask himself the meaning of what he had just seen and heard. That Florence was not the invisible musician to whom he had formerly listened he at once perceived, for he had instantly recognised the voice; and Ella was alone in the schoolroom. Why then had he been tacitly deceived by Lady Harriette and her daughters, no one of whom had uttered a disclaimer, when he had attributed that voice to Miss Ashton? The worldliness of the mother he so thoroughly appreciated that he could understand the possibility of her insincerity when she had a sufficient motive for deceit; but what motive could she have in the present

case? Florence too—was it possible that the pure-minded, sensitive Florence, could lend herself to an actual falsehood? She whom he had invested with all the womanly virtues—surely it could not be—and Matilda, the light-hearted, laughing Matilda, still a mere girl—the very idea was monstrous! But still it clung to him; and then he reflected in how strange a position he had found the orphan; neatly but poorly dressed; seated in a lonely room, with its shabby furniture and faded hangings, and busily engaged on an elaborate piece of finery.

Suddenly the truth flashed upon him, and his soul revolted against the ungenerous jealousy and injustice of Lady Harriette. Yes, it *must* be so; that radiant beauty, and wondrous talent had alarmed the mother—but the daughters? How had he been deceived in *them*. Eminently frank and truthful by nature, the young man could not contemplate without terror the fact that he had narrowly escaped the

wretchedness of linking his fate for ever with that of a woman who had been so tutored, and who had proved so apt a scholar. Florence ceased to be lovely in his eyes, for he found that the ideal idol which he had created had no prototype in her ; and he began to pine for the hour when he should turn his back upon Ashton Court, probably for ever. Meanwhile, in order to wear away the time until the breakfast-bell summoned the family to assemble he unpacked his desk, and sat down to write a few lines of acknowledgment to his uncle for the sanction which he had given to his marriage with Miss Ashton in the event of his still wishing, when they became better known to each other, to make her his wife. The letter was straightforward and manly ; he entered into no explanations ; but merely stated his conviction that it would be desirable for both parties to see a little more of the world before they ventured on so important and irretrievable a step.

“Thus, my dear sir;” he concluded; “I shall take my leave of the baronet and his family without mentioning the subject of my attachment either to the young lady or her parents; and, as I shall shortly have ‘the world before me where to choose,’ I may perhaps have reason some time hence, to congratulate myself upon my somewhat tardy prudence.”

Having folded and sealed his letter Frank threw open his window, and leant out to breathe the fresh cool air of the morning; for despite the prompt and ready resolution with which he had flung off the chain that he had hitherto so lovingly wound about himself, it galled him still; his brow was hot and fevered, and his heart beat hard; it was his first disappointment; and he was moreover mortified to find how easily, had it not been for a happy accident, he might have become the dupe of his own want of penetration. The ramble through the park and grounds was abandoned;

its charm had been dissolved as if by enchantment. What were the haunts of Florence Ashton now to him? Merely the mute witnesses of his weakness, not the green spots of memory which they would have been had he not met the orphan; and then once more his thoughts reverted to her; and he called to remembrance her every word and gesture; the noble serenity with which she bore the persecution to which she was subjected, (for that she was persecuted, and made the victim of her own superiority, he felt convinced;) while bitterly did he lament his inability to stand forward as her champion, and to secure for her that consideration under her uncle's roof to which she was so well entitled.

While thus painfully musing on the event of the morning and its consequences the sound of the bell reached him, and he at once descended to the breakfast-room, where he found Miss Ashton occupied in arranging some hot-house flowers in a porcelain vase.

And very beautiful she looked as she greeted him with a beaming smile, her magnificent hair smoothly banded upon a brow as fair and as transparent as alabaster, and her graceful form draped in a simple morning dress of clear white muslin. But this hitherto, in his eyes, charming simplicity, which he had believed to be so consonant with her character, had lost all its attraction ; and it was not without an effort that he compelled himself to maintain a cheerful conversation until Horace made his appearance laden with half-a-dozen superfluous articles which he had just discovered to be essentially necessary to him during his absence.

At length the party was complete ; nor did the glance of Lady Harriette as it anxiously wandered from her daughter to himself on her entrance escape him. Nothing, however, could exceed her amiability ; and once, for the first time since he had become her guest, she addressed him by his christian name ; apologising, however, immediately afterwards

by declaring that she had so accustomed herself to regard him as one of the family that her error had been involuntary.

The young man bowed, and expressed himself much flattered by such an admission, nor could he refrain from risking one look at Florence; while so great was his satisfaction when he detected no blush upon her cheek, that he almost began to hope that he had done her injustice; as, had she been aware of her mother's inference, his heart whispered that she must have betrayed some symptom of confusion. But no; she was sitting calmly with the same sweet smile upon her lips with which she had first met him that morning, apparently totally unconscious that any allusion could possibly have been made to herself.

Hatherston became fidgetty and uncomfortable, and almost began to congratulate himself that his letter to his uncle still remained in his desk; but the meal was not yet at an end, and he still waited and watched.

“Well, I now begin to hope ;” exclaimed Horace during a pause in the conversation ; “that nothing has been forgotten, Frank ; and that we shall make a very respectable start. We have only the leave-taking to encounter, but that is, after all, the worst part of the affair ; and I am rejoiced to find that my father is unusually well and free from pain this morning. My mother and the girls will miss us for a time of course ; it would be very mortifying to suppose that they would not ; but, by the bye, what about Ella, my lady ? I really cannot leave home without shaking hands with her ; and she must be very ill indeed to make it necessary for her to refuse to see me.”

“I am sorry, however, to say that such is the case ;” was the reply ; “but you may safely trust either myself or one of your sisters with your parting compliments to your cousin.”

“Parting compliments !” echoed her son ; “Did my interest and affection for Ella not

prompt something more genial than parting compliments, I should care little to go through such a ceremony ; but feeling as I do towards her——”

“I am glad to be able to relieve not only *your* anxiety, Horace, but also that of Lady Harriette, which must, as a natural consequence be even greater than your own. I had accidentally the pleasure of an interview with Miss Ella Ashton this morning ;” said Hatherston, looking up from his plate ; “and so thoroughly did she appear to have recovered her late indisposition, that, had I not been aware of the fact, I should never have imagined that she had so lately been a sufferer.”

Now, indeed, the speaker had no longer cause to exult in the unconscious composure of Florence. Instinctively the mother and daughter exchanged a glance which to him, anxious as he was to convince himself of the injustice of his first suspicions, left nothing unrevealed. Their secret lay bare before

him. The hot blood which in a second crimsoned the cheek and brow of the young beauty deepened into purple in those of Lady Harriette. She had been but a shallow schemer after all ; nevertheless she struggled bravely against her emotion : and forcing a smile, she expressed her gratification at the intelligence.

“ You will perhaps think it singular, Mr. Hatherston ;” she said ;—she did not call him ‘ Frank’ now,— “ that I should have been unaware of the amendment in my niece’s health ; but you must remember that I have been so fully occupied with my arrangements for Horace, that I have not only not seen, but I fear not even thought, of her for the last three days ; and had consequently no idea that she had left her room. May I ask where you met ?”

“ Your ladyship has not only every right to ask but also to be answered. As I was leaving my chamber I was met in the gallery by a gush of song so wild and thrilling, that for

the second time I stood spellbound. The sounds came from the school-room ; and believing that the unseen minstrel was Miss Ashton, as you may remember that I had done on a previous occasion, I ventured to intrude upon her privacy, to express my acknowledgments for the delight which she had involuntarily afforded to me. I did not, however, find myself compelled to entreat the pardon of your daughter as I had anticipated, but that of your niece, whom I found busily employed with her needle like one of the Roman matrons of old, even at that early hour. Of course we renewed our former acquaintance, and I had the gratification of hearing from her own lips that she was no longer an invalid."

It was wonderful how calmly the young man entered upon this explanation, conscious as he was of the effect which it could not fail to produce upon his hearers. Florence sat with drooping head, trembling in every limb, and no longer daring to meet the eyes of her

mother ; while Lady Harriette, for the first time in her life, quailed under a sense of her own duplicity. For an instant she hated herself—not for her project, but for the want of caution which had caused its failure. While forbidding her daughter to exercise her voice, she had omitted to lay the same prohibition on her niece ; and, nevertheless, what could more easily have been foreseen than that Ella, deprived of all other means of indulging in her favourite pursuit, should solace her long hours of solitude by song ?

All this passed through her mind with the rapidity of lightning, and she had sufficiently mastered herself by the time that Frank had ceased speaking, to say ironically :—

“ Had you told me this of any other person, Mr. Hatherston, I should have been greatly astonished, I confess, but in the case of Miss Ella Ashton, I have long ceased to be surprised at anything. Her whole life is made up of caprice—I fear that I ought to say, temper.

However, she is the niece of Sir Hercules, and it is the duty of his wife and daughters to bear with her peculiarities."

Frank bowed again ; and there was something singularly irritating in that silent bow, although it was accompanied by a courteous smile.

"By Jove, I will have her out of her hermitage before she is an hour older !" exclaimed Horace, springing from his chair ; "and I shall insist upon knowing what she means by refusing to see Hatherston and myself, now that she is well enough to join the family party. It is really too bad."

"Let me beg you to remember, my dear Horace——" commenced Lady Harriette, pinching her thin lips together most ominously.

"Oh, nonsense, mother ;" broke in the spoiled son ; "we have no time for lectures now. We shall be off in a few hours ; and let Ella have what reasons she may for such

extraordinary estrangement, I must and will see her before I go."

There was no opportunity for any rejoinder, as the words were no sooner uttered than the impetuous young man hurried from the room.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PEER AND HIS NEIGHBOUR.

WITH the exception of the baronet and his niece, the leavetaking of the two young men was rather a relief than a trial to all the party at Ashton Court. The hopes of Lady Harriette had waxed dim, while both the girls were conscious of a change in the manner of Frank, carefully as he endeavoured to conceal it. Horace had carried his point; and after a long interview with his cousin, had become gloomy and depressed to a degree which threatened to render at least the commencement of his journey uninteresting enough; while Hatherston was evidently anxious for

the hour that would liberate him from the task of playing a part obnoxious to his frank and open nature.

Baffled in her manœuvring diplomacy, Lady Harriette, as a matter of course, vented her mortification upon her daughters, regardless of the fact that she had herself instigated the duplicity which had estranged the promising young lover. "How was it;" she asked; "that they had profited so little by the expensive education which had been bestowed on them, while their cousin had contrived to throw them so thoroughly in the background? Did they fully comprehend the humiliation which they had brought upon themselves? And how had they been obtuse enough to allow Miss Ella Ashton, who should have been their inferior on all points, to eclipse them as she had done? They had not only disgraced themselves, but her. Never were more thankless children; they might now do as they pleased; study or not, she would no longer interfere."

“But really, mamma;” at length ventured Matilda; “as far as I could judge, Mr. Hatherston appeared to have, or to fancy he had, some deeper reason for his sudden estrangement than the fact that he had heard Ella sing instead of Florence.”

“You do well to remind me that I am indebted to your cousin for the annoyance to which I have been subjected this morning;” said Lady Harriette bitterly; “I am not likely again to forget it.”

Nor did she.

The day which succeeded the departure of Horace and his friend was one of deep and grateful joy to Ella, for it brought her first long-wished-for letter from Madame Despreaux. And what a letter it was! The outgushing of a happy and grateful heart; full of that earthly sunshine which is, alas! so rare, and generally so transient.

“I have now only one care, only one an-

xiety ;” she wrote ; “ but you cling so closely to my heart, *ma mignonne*, that my uncertainty as to your happiness is a perpetual source of uneasiness. You must write soon, in order to relieve my mind. Tell me all about yourself, *et ce brave* Sir Hercules. I am afraid that I care but little either about my late pupils, or Miladi their mother. Your cousins have done my teaching no credit, Ella, for I have not succeeded in educating *their hearts*. I did once hope, and even believe, that I had done so ; but, unfortunately alike for them and for myself, there was a stronger influence than my own at work, and they have turned out mere fashionable worldlings. I have, however, the recollection of you, *ma petite bonne*, to console me ; I feel that in you, at least, the poor governess will not be disappointed. Only be true to yourself ; watch over your feelings, and strive against them—for you *have* failings, dear child, but you also have strength to overcome them. Your good English precept says,

‘Bear and Forbear;’ *that* is, I fear, to be your trial, perhaps for years; but pray that you may be helped to carry your cross, and I will also pray for you.

“And now you will like to hear something of me, *n’est ce pas?* Well, *chérie*, I have nothing but good to tell you; for *hélas!* I already knew that I should never again see my dear mother in her home; still, when I found her place empty, my first feeling was one of bitter grief; but I struggled against the murmuring of my poor, weak, sinful nature, and wiped away my tears, remembering that she was at rest. Brothers, cousins, and all the family were there to welcome the poor labourer who had so long been absent; and I had babies to kiss who had heard of ‘aunt Cécil’ as a family tradition, but had never before seen her. We were a happy and a noisy party; we had so much to ask and to hear; and if the youngsters were pleased with their English toys and trifles, the elders

were still more so to find that *Madame l'Institutrice* had realised enough during her exile, to enable her once more to live *en Comtesse* in her modest native town for the rest of her life. I did not tell them, Ella—how could I?—that the warmest corner of my heart was closed against them; there was still room enough left for all, and I kept my secret.—You, however, know it; and will not forget what I told you when we parted. Still, I will hope better things for you—I will hope that as you grow into womanhood you will be more appreciated, more beloved. Keep this hope always before you, and it will enable you to support the trials of the present.

“There, you see that I have wandered back to you, whom my best wish is to cheer. So once more of myself. *Figurez-vous, ma belle*, that *M. le Maire* has given me a ball—actually a ball at the *hôtel-de-ville*! How I can fancy the amazement of Miladi at my receiving such an honour! But they are primitive people in

my dear little town ; and act rather from the heart than from the head. And then the boûquets ! So far, *chérie*, I have had no opportunity of regretting the Ashton conservatories. And the bonbons ! You know that I am a thorough Frenchwoman for bonbons ; and I have such a supply ; I only wish that you were here to help me to eat them. But what amuses me more than all the rest, are the extraordinary notions that all classes in this obscure corner have of your pleasant England. I have not quite persuaded them yet that I have had a glimpse of sunshine since I left home, or that I have eaten a *plat* which was not half raw ! It is really wonderful that two countries which have, in reality, so much in common, and which are such near neighbours, should have such erroneous notions of each other. I need not tell you that I am doing my best to enlighten my townspeople ; but as yet I have effected very little. We are all so tenacious of our prejudices that we scarcely

thank those who endeavour to remove them. Write to me often, my child, and always in my own language: do not labour your letters, for you are aware that I greatly prefer errors of style to over-elaborated composition, which betrays that the head rather than the heart has been in the task. Adieu—once more remember, that you are the daughter of my adoption, should the day ever come when my tenderness and care may be necessary to your happiness. *Toute à vous.*

“CELESTE DESPREAUX.”

From the period of her son's departure, and her conviction that her hopes of securing his friend for Florence had failed, Lady Harriette resumed her former course of life; and again the Miss Ashtons became the ornament of every ball-room; while the orphan, who had been reinstated in the sick-chamber of her uncle, and once more permitted to become the assistant of Mademoiselle Sophie, was rarely

visible beyond the boundaries tacitly assigned to her. Nor did Sir Hercules utter one comment on the subject. Sickness is proverbially selfish; and as he had never been tended as Ella tended him, he silently and gratefully accepted alike her attentions and her companionship.

About this time, however, he was roused from his lethargy by a strange rumour which was convulsing the nerves of the whole county. It was brought to him by Mr. Goldworthy, whose trepidation was almost ludicrous. The neighbourhood was invaded by engineers and surveyors. It was in the infancy of rail-roads; those iron-armed monsters which had begun to stretch their gigantic limbs over the length and breadth of the land; and which now threatened the county of Leicestershire.

“It is really infamous!” had been the exclamation of the excited old bachelor; “As if capitalists, who have sunk their fortunes; or, at all events, a serious portion of them, in

purchasing estates, were to be compelled to have their property cut up into angles, because people who have not time to travel like gentlemen, and look about them by the way, want to go tearing through the air at the rate of twelve miles an hour ! But I for one will not put up with it ; and so I told a jackanapes of a fellow who called upon me yesterday to inform me—which he did as coolly as though the place was his own, instead of mine—that the Directors considered it probable that the line would pass through the wood immediately beyond my home-park, and skirt the Willow-Farm. He was, to be sure, good enough to assure me that they would be careful not to approach the house nearer than was absolutely necessary ; but I assured him in return that they should approach it at any distance at their peril. Not a jot, however, did he seem to care for the threat ; and quite as much at his ease as ever, he talked in a high tone of some confounded Act of Parliament ; and the com-

pensation which the Company were prepared to offer—as if any thing could compensate to a gentleman of landed property for the ruin of his estate !”

“Are they likely to interfere with the Ashton Court property ?” inquired the baronet nervously.

“No ; that is what renders the thing still more aggravating ;” was the *naïve* reply ; “They had almost made up their minds to do so, in which case I should have escaped ; but their project was no sooner known to that harebrained young spendthrift Lord Elwood, than he made interest to have the line carried through his own land. You know he cannot cut any timber at Elwood, as the place is strictly entailed ; and this c—d compensation, as they are pleased to call it, will serve just as well or better to recruit his funds, and enable him to carry on the war a year or two longer. No sooner said than done ; down came the surveyors, who, as a matter of course,

discovered that the Elwood line would answer better than the Ashton line; (which, by the bye, Sir Hercules, would have run through your stables;) and I am to be made the victim of my lord's improvidence."

"I am really sorry for you, Goldworthy;" said the baronet, scarcely able to suppress a smile at the undisguised egotism of his companion; "but as these companies are stated to be possessed of immense capital, they will in all probability come down handsomely for the damage they occasion, and enable you to purchase more land, and to spread your property in the other direction."

"Pray, Sir;" asked the enraged manufacturer very bitterly; "are you prepared to allow me to spread it in the direction of Ashton Court?"

"Certainly not; I consider myself only as the steward of my son; besides which, you may remember that my property has been entailed for centuries, like that of your neigh-

bour Lord Elwood ;” was the haughty reply : “ Nor, even should circumstances have actually occurred as they have been represented to you, am I by any means prepared to blame that very excellent young man. It has long been patent in the county that he inherited from his father a deeply-mortgaged property ; while he has, notwithstanding, punctually paid the jointure of his widowed mother, and portioned off in a manner suited to their rank, two sisters, both older than himself. I am aware that he cannot cut a stick of timber, as there was a stringent clause in the Will to forbid it ; and it is therefore by no means surprising that he should gladly avail himself of the present opportunity to relieve himself from the worse than Assyrian bondage of his liabilities.”

“ That may be all very well ;” was the captious rejoinder of Mr. Goldworthy ; “ but why am I to be made the victim ? Why is *my* land of all the land in the county to be

made ducks and drakes of for the accommodation of my Lord Elwood and a railway company? Did they suppose that I sunk a large sum of money, which, as floating capital, would have brought me in eight or ten per cent., in purchasing an estate for them to cut through as I would cut through an apple? I maintain, Sir Hercules, that it is scandalous!"

"It is annoying beyond all doubt;" said the baronet; "and for my own part I am old-fashioned enough to be decidedly opposed to this new-fangled style of travelling. A sad levelling system, I fear; and any thing but calculated to uphold the dignity of the nobles and gentry in the eyes of the lower classes."

"Levelling! To be sure it is;" exclaimed his companion; "why, sir, the very essence of the business is to bring *everything* to a dead level. Such boring and banking to cut through hills, and ornament hollows with a prominent back-bone, you never heard of in your life! Pretty landscape scenery we shall

enjoy if their scheme is carried out ; and very pleasant it will be, no doubt, to be deafened with the shrieking of engines, the roaring of iron wheels upon iron bars ; with clouds of black smoke, and showers of hot water let off in steam for the benefit of our woods and meadows ; not to mention an occasional spark which may fire a farm.—We are no freeborn Englishmen if we put up with this ! But I have not yet told you the worst, Sir Hercules ; I have not yet told you the worst. What do you think of their having dared to propose to me—I, Geoffrey Goldworthy—to become a director of their villanous company, and to take shares ? Take shares, forsooth ! If they have their way, I shall have a larger share in the undertaking forced upon me than I shall find at all agreeable.”

And yet—such is human nature—only a few months after this violent philippic, the surveyors of the vituperated railway having discovered a more eligible line than that

which had threatened to dismember the estate of the newly-made landed-proprietor, that gentleman suddenly became one of its most zealous admirers and advocates ; his name figured in the list of directors ; and his fire-proof safe had in its keeping a goodly number of shares, doubly valuable from the somewhat unusual fact of their being actually paid up. It was wonderful to see how potent an effect the turning of the line had produced on his opinions.

Fortunately, however, the same decision which spared Goldworthy Park also respected Ashton Court ; while stretches of white posts might be seen traversing Elwood Chase, which, but that he was perfectly satisfied with the arrangement and its results, must assuredly have gone far to threaten the sanity of its owner. It is true that the noble old mansion and the home-park remained undesecrated ; but hill and hollow, wood and coppice, on the outskirts of the estate were evidently to be

traversed; and the river which fed the lake, the boast of the Chase, to be spanned by a bridge.

It may, however, be surmised that Lord Elwood, although he had rather courted than discouraged this invasion of his property, had not done so without considerable pain; for the first spade had not been struck into his land before he left England, declaring his determination not to return until the privacy of his demesne was no longer invaded by workmen. Saddened there can be no doubt he was in spirit, but it was nevertheless with a lightened heart that he set forth on his pilgrimage. To Lord Elwood anything appeared preferable to mortgaging the home of his forefathers, or incurring debts, by which he might be hampered for the remainder of his life, and rendered prospectively the debtor of his own son; for although still a bachelor, the young nobleman was already nourishing a fancy in his bosom upon which he dwelt with considerable complacency.

With that fancy we have, however, at present nothing to do. It must suffice that, to the unexpected regret and disappointment of many of his fair county acquaintance, Lord Elwood as we have already stated turned his face towards Italy.

CHAPTER X.

A QUID PRO QUO.

Two years passed by, and Horace and his friend were still absent. They had encountered Lord Elwood at Rome, who had proposed that they should join company ; and at the period in which we resume our tale they had visited Turkey and Greece, wandered through Syria, and were about to ascend the Nile. Nor had these four-and-twenty months been uneventful ones to the inhabitants of Ashton Court ; more than one sorrow had made its way beneath the roof-tree of the baronet, and anxiety and fear hovered about his halls.

The failure of the banking-house to which the accumulated economies of half a lifetime had been confided, swept away the dowries of his daughters ; the principals had absconded to America, carrying with them their ill-gotten hoards ; and many a widow's and an orphan's heart wept tears of blood, as they found themselves cast penniless upon the mercies of a ruthless world.

In the case of Sir Hercules Ashton it is true that the evil was of less magnitude, and he consequently met with little or no sympathy ; for all were ready to remember the extent of his income, and to overlook the demands which were made upon it. A few even profited by the circumstances of his loss to recal his ungenerous conduct to his brother, little recking how bitterly he had expiated his fault by years of repentance and regret ; for it is one of the peculiarities of our human nature think more harshly of one's fellow-creatures when they most require our commiseration

and support, than when, in their prosperity they are independent of our judgment. Of what was said in the county the baronet, however, knew nothing : the evil under his own roof-tree sufficed : while the wrath and indignation of Lady Harriette were so great that, far from affording any consolation to her husband, she still further irritated his feelings by her ceaseless and useless lamentations.

The natural consequence ensued. A more violent attack of gout than he had ever hitherto experienced rendered Sir Hercules perfectly helpless ; and he was left to the sole care of his niece, Lady Harriette declaring that in the then state of her nerves, the spectacle of her husband's suffering was more than she could encounter.

And tenderly and sweetly did the orphan acquit herself of the duty imposed upon her, painful as it was ; for the agonies of Sir Hercules were so intense as to wring from him groans which were echoed in her own trem-

bling heart ; and often was she compelled to turn away her head as she wiped the perspiration from his brow, in order to conceal from him the tears which were raining down her cheeks.

And while the baronet was undergoing this torture, the whole county had become rabid on the subject of the railroad. Visions of gigantic fortunes to be acquired by merely investing a few hundreds, and then quietly looking on, were indulged in on all sides ; and even prudent men, who had hitherto exhibited the utmost caution in their commercial operations, eschewing all speculation, and confining themselves to the legitimate operations of commerce ; and steady country-gentlemen, who, aware of the amount of their incomes, had hitherto been content to limit their outlay to their means, were alike eager to profit by the golden opportunity.

Every visitor who arrived at Ashton Court had some marvellous tale to tell of the enor-

mous profits realised by some enterprising individual, who had been far-sighted enough to purchase before shares were at a premium ; and many were the regrets expressed by the narrators that they had not been equally alive to their own interests. It was not, however, yet too late ; there was a certainty of their at least doubling their value ; it was no longer a speculation ; it was a safe and lucrative investment ; in fact, what risk *could* there be where honourable and popular names were the guarantee of just and skilful financial management ; and common-sense the best evidence of the absolute necessity of the existence of railways ?

Nothing could be more clear or satisfactory ; and accordingly the purchases were made without misgiving, and “all went merry as a marriage-bell.” Mr. Goldworthy, delighted at the prominent position which he had so sagaciously secured, was especially exhilarated ; and watched with delighted interest the pro-

gress of the works which had, for the time being, made a chaos of Elwood. He was never weary of seeing the stately timber fall before the axe; the gangs of workmen with their iron-wheeled barrows, running along elastic planks, pitching their loads of soil in hollows hitherto covered with wild ferns, and browsed by herds of deer; or digging deep into picturesque moulds and slopes to obtain the level against which he had formerly declaimed so energetically. It was a new phase of his existence; and he enjoyed it accordingly. His glowing anticipations and voluble self-gratulation were, however, on the rare intervals when he was admitted to the sick-room of the baronet, coldly, and even fretfully received. Sir Hercules by no means admired the innovation by which several of the oldest estates in the county were to be invaded, in order to furnish their quota to the great iron highway; and at length, ruffled by a want of sympathy by which he at length considered himself personally

aggrieved, Mr. Goldworthy alternately transferred his eloquence to Lady Harriette, who was far from remaining equally impassive under the spell of the enchanter.

Hitherto she had regarded the worthy manufacturer as an intruder and a plebeian, to whom circumstances compelled her to be civil ; but with whom she—the daughter of the earl of Disborough — could not necessarily have one taste or feeling in common ; but gradually, as she remembered the probable accession of her idolised son to a bankrupt peerage, and the dowerless condition of her daughters, she began to lend a willing, and even an anxious, ear to the magnificent assurances of her excited neighbour. Who could tell ? Here was, perhaps, an opportunity, not only of redeeming the serious loss which they had just incurred, but even of enabling Horace to clear the deeply encumbered property which he was at no distant day to inherit. The prospect was tempting—was

irresistible—and she began at length to ask herself how she might induce Sir Hercules to overcome his prejudice, and to enrich both himself and his family. There was nothing derogatory in the affair; nothing that smacked of commerce; it would, indeed, show a proper degree of public spiritedness on his part were he to lend his name and his influence to the undertaking; and having succeeded in convincing herself of this fact, she determined to have a long and serious conversation with Mr. Goldworthy, and then to explain her views and wishes to her husband.

The opportunity was not slow in presenting itself. Satisfied that he must ere long be at least a millionaire, the enthusiastic gentleman felt himself much more at his ease than formerly with the daughter of the spendthrift earl; nor was he by any means blind to the fact that his reception at Ashton Court had latterly become much more cordial than it had ever hitherto been. Accordingly, with his

natural shrewdness, he began to combine circumstances in his own mind ; and ultimately arrived at the conviction that the same shock which had prostrated the baronet had overthrown the bulwarks of Lady Harriette's pride ; who, being far more practical than her husband, was anxious to redeem their late loss.

Another attraction, we are also bound in justice to admit, drew the portly manufacturer Ashton-ward. He had begun to discover that he was solitary in his greatness ; and that although all was prospering satisfactorily at Goldworthy Park—that the trees thrived, the crops ripened, and the game increased,—his stately rooms were somewhat too large for his individual occupation. For a time he endeavoured to shake off the conviction ; he had reached the sober age of forty-five without a fancy of the kind : but then, as he argued with himself, he had not formerly been a landed proprietor ; he had held no stake in

the country ; while he was now a more responsible and a more important personage. It was, therefore, his duty, like other great landholders, to take root in his adopted county, and to enable himself to bequeath a name as well as an estate. And Miss Florence Ashton was so beautiful and so accomplished, and would look so well at the head of his table, and in the corner of his chariot ! She had, moreover, noble relations—and Mr. Goldworthy chuckled as he remembered that her noble relations were poor enough to render his purse, and his house, and his equipages desirable enough to some of them—while to himself they would afford the only distinction which, in this money-worshipping age, was not to be purchased for his own somewhat obscure escutcheon. He was even disposed to be generous and magnificent on the occasion ; and should Sir Hercules and Lady Harriette demur to giving him their eldest daughter, to even accept at their hands their laughter-

loving, blooming Matilda ; while he equally resolved, in either case, to offer to take the young lady without any fortune, and to make the most liberal settlements.

Intoxicated as he was by this new project, Mr. Goldworthy was, however, sufficiently alive to the fact that his only chance of success was to accomplish his purpose before he put his good neighbour Sir Hercules in the way of quadrupling his present income through the medium of the marvellous monster which was now driving its iron arms through the county ; and, accordingly, he one morning dressed himself with unusual care, and proceeded on his delicate mission.

Lady Harriette was visible ; but for this he was quite prepared, since she had latterly never refused to receive him, as she had once been in the constant habit of doing ; and he therefore at once followed the servant to her morning-room, formerly forbidden ground, but into which he had of late not only been per-

mitted to penetrate, but where he had been very courteously welcomed. He was not, however, so thoroughly at his ease as he could have wished: for he was conscious that his present errand must be altogether unexpected by his hostess, and that it was quite uncertain how his proposal might be received. He felt moreover uncomfortable at the conviction that his face was redder and hotter than was quite consistent with his sense of personal dignity; and he coughed once or twice to steady his nerves, without succeeding in effecting his object; so that it was with a manifest absence of his usual composure and self-appreciation that he returned the smiling salutation of the bland and high-bred mistress of the mansion.

“Good morning, Mr. Goldworthy;” said Lady Harriette, as she extended two fingers to her visitor without rising from her seat; “I am glad to be able to tell you that Sir Hercules has passed an unusually quiet night, and is

wonderfully well this morning. It is really most kind of you to take so much interest in his health; and I can assure you that we both feel it to be so."

"You are very good, madam, very good;" said the embryo suitor, as he took the chair to which a gesture from the lady invited him; "but I feel bound to confess to your ladyship that, happy as I am to have such excellent news of my worthy and respected neighbour Sir Hercules, I had a double motive for my visit to-day."

Mr. Goldworthy had boldly passed the rubicon, and the damp started upon his forehead.

"Have you sprung another gold-mine, my good sir?" asked Lady Harriette archly.

The gentleman fidgetted upon his seat. Although, to use a French metaphor, he had "burnt his vessels, and was consequently unable to retreat," he had still to encounter the action; and if he had found it easy to

plunge *in medias res*, he nevertheless experienced difficulty enough in keeping his head above water. It was, however, absolutely necessary that he should make some reply to the playful enquiry of his companion ; and he therefore on his side, got up what he intended for a smile as he said with an attempt at facetiousness : “ No, no, my lady ; I remember the old Scotch song has taught us, that

‘ It is well to be off with the old love,
Before we are on with the new ;’

so I intend to confine my ambition to the mine that I have already sprung.”

Now if there were one thing upon earth which revolted the mistress of Ashton Court, it was to hear herself addressed as “ my lady” by any one above the rank of a servant ; and had Mr. Goldworthy been guilty of this solecism only a few months previously, he would soon have been made sensible that he had, in some way or other, committed himself in the

eyes of his aristocratic companion ; but Lady Harriette had her own motives for overlooking all such little discrepancies of breeding at the present period ; and she consequently continued the conversation by a second query.

“ You are then still as sanguine as ever on the subject of this railroad ? ”

“ More so, my dear lady ; very much more so ; ” was the ready rejoinder : “ I have now, in fact, most satisfactorily ascertained that it *cannot* fail ; and I could prove this to your ladyship in half-an-hour, if it were not for two reasons ; in the first place it would be but a dry and uninteresting study for a lady ; and in the next— ” he hesitated for a moment ; changed the position of his chair ; and then by a violent effort, repeated his last words.

“ And, in the next, my lady, to be quite candid with you, I intruded on you this morning to make a request—a proposal—to tell you, in short, what I have upon my mind.”

“ I fear, Mr. Goldworthy,” said Lady Harriette ; “ that, upon this subject, Sir Hercules will prove impracticable.”

“ I trust not, madam ; for really my whole heart is so set upon it—”

“ He has strong prejudices, as you are aware.”

“ I know it—I know it—but surely Sir Hercules does not doubt my honour ? nor how earnestly I would devote myself—”

“ Not for an instant, Mr. Goldworthy, believe me. What he apprehends is that you are yourself deluded ; and may hereafter see cause to repent—”

“ Never, madam ; it is impossible.”

“ I am rejoiced that your conviction is so well founded ; and I confess that did I possess sufficient influence with Sir Hercules to induce him to consent, I would myself willingly fall into your views, provided that we could do so without any material present sacrifice.”

“ You shall not sacrifice a penny, my dear

madam ; not a penny !” exclaimed her delighted listener ; who, thinking only of his proposal of marriage, flattered himself that Lady Harriette had penetrated, and approved his purpose : “ On the contrary, I am ready to do everything which Sir Hercules and your ladyship may consider to be proper and expedient on the occasion : you have only to name your own terms ; say twenty, thirty, or even forty thousand pounds. I can at once prove to your mutual satisfaction that I am quite able to make it over without the slightest inconvenience ; while you will render me the happiest of men by consenting to my wishes.”

“ Really, Mr. Goldworthy ;” said Lady Harriette in undisguised amazement ; “ I scarcely know how to reply to so magnificent and unheard-of a proposal ; but you must at once see, my good sir, how utterly impossible it is that we should lay ourselves under so heavy an obligation.”

“ Nay, nay, madam ;” interposed the worthy

gentleman with an earnestness which did credit to his heart, even if his good sense remained somewhat questionable; "you take, if you will excuse my saying so, quite a wrong view of the case; as, under all circumstances, it is I who must be the obliged person; and so I shall be, nor will you ever find me slow to confess it."

The surprise of the lady increased every moment. What could be the meaning of such an act of self-abnegation on the part of the prudent, money-loving Mr. Goldworthy? It was now her turn to feel embarrassed. "In any case;" she said after the silence of a moment; "either of the sums you have named would be far more than can be necessary for such a purpose."

"Once more, I cannot agree with you;" persisted the delighted listener: "to secure the hand of Miss Ashton I would do twice as much as I have said."

CHAPTER XI.

A DISAPPOINTMENT.

“SIR!” exclaimed the daughter of Lord Disborough, almost bounding from her chair.

“Madam!” echoed the guest, actually starting to his feet as though impelled by a galvanic battery.

“You cannot surely mean,”—gasped Lady Harriette, when she could command her voice; “You cannot surely mean me to understand that you are a suitor for the hand of Miss Ashton? Of *my daughter*? Of the grandchild of the Earl of Disborough?”

“I thought that I had explained myself very clearly to your ladyship;” said the dis-

concerted wooer, as he still stood, hat in hand, before her ; “ that my ambition was to become the husband of one of the Miss Ashtons, and that I was prepared to make a very handsome settlement if my proposal were accepted.”

“ The niece of Sir Hercules is also a Miss Ashton,” said Lady Harriette scornfully.

“ Well, madam ;” stammered out the discomfited suitor, who remembered as the lady spoke that the orphan could also boast her noble connections ; “ Well, madam ; the niece of Sir Hercules be it, upon the conditions already named.”

“ There can be no doubt, Mr. Goldworthy ;” said Lady Harriette with a shade less bitterness, as she discovered the ductile material of which her visitor was made ; “ that Ella would feel very much flattered by your munificent offer ; but there are circumstances connected with the young lady’s position in my family which would render her marriage highly inexpedient at present. Be good enough there-

fore to accept the acknowledgments which I offer to you in her name, although she is unable to avail herself of your very kind intentions."

"Could I not receive the assurance of my disappointment from her own lips?" asked the pertinacious bachelor.

"Impossible, Sir;" was the resolute reply; "Marriage is a subject which I never permit to occupy the minds of young ladies under my protection. We will change the subject if you please, Mr. Goldworthy; for although it is out of my power to welcome you either as a son-in-law or a nephew, both Sir Hercules and myself have a great respect for you as a neighbour; and really, my dear sir, when you consider the discrepancy of age between yourself and the mere girls of my family, you must acknowledge that your heart has in this instance run away with your head. Moreover—" she added; "I have the additional satisfaction of feeling convinced that

your heart cannot suffer very deeply from this temporary disappointment, since the alliance which you contemplated with our family led you to regard either of the Miss Ashtons with equal favor."

"I can nevertheless assure you, madam—"

"I beg to repeat my request that the subject of our discourse may be changed, Mr. Goldworthy;" said Lady Harriette with a decision which rendered all further persistance impossible; "And surely in a time of local excitement such as this, we can be at no loss for conversation. Come, come; pray resume your seat; I have no wish to excite any unpleasant feeling; and I am quite sincere when I assure you that I take a lively interest in your present pursuits. Have you ascertained the compensation obtained by Lord Elwood from your Company?"

"I have, madam; we have paid over ten thousand pounds to his lordship's banker."

"Poor young man!" ejaculated her ladyship

in a tone of genuine sympathy : “ but it must have been a sad trial nevertheless.”

“ I don’t know ; I don’t know ;” said the only half-appeased and mortified visitor : “ the bargain is far from being a bad one for Lord Elwood, as he, moreover, retains all the valuable timber which we have been compelled to cut down.”

“ Still, his old ancestral trees must have been dear to him, and they cannot be replaced.”

“ No doubt ; but he was, by all accounts, in need of ten thousand pounds, and *they* cannot be easily obtained.”

“ True,” said the lady, as her brow became clouded, and she heaved a low and inaudible sigh.

“ I fear that Sir Hercules is standing in his own light by refusing to take some of our shares.”

“ I fear so too.”

“ Particularly as before long their value will be doubled.”

“In which case it will of course be an excellent investment ;” conceded Lady Harriette ; “but Sir Hercules, as you are well aware, Mr. Goldworthy, understands nothing about business, of which he has always had a horror. No one knows save myself how bitterly he resented the commercial career of Miss Ella Ashton’s father.”

“But that terminated unfortunately, I believe ;” was the tart rejoinder.

“Most unfortunately. We were misled upon the subject for years ; but whether owing to misfortune, or, what is infinitely more probable, to mismanagement, the result was his leaving to our care and kindness an almost penniless daughter.”

“Of whom I have offered to relieve your ladyship.”

“Oh, we are not yet weary of her ;” said the lady with an ambiguous laugh ; “Indeed, to confess the truth, she would be very much missed both by my daughters and myself,

while to her uncle she is indispensable ; therefore even while we cannot do otherwise than regret that her father's affairs turned out so unfavourably, we have no wish to see her leave her present home."

"Then I am to consider the answer which I have received from your ladyship as final?"

"Decidedly."

Mr. Goldworthy again rose from his seat. He glanced furtively round the apartment. He made two attempts to speak ; but both proved abortive. At length, after having smoothed his already immaculate hat with his glove, swished some imaginary dust from his coat-sleeve, and pulled down his waistcoat, in which there was not a single perceptible crease, he said in a low but earnest tone : "I can quite understand, my lady, that you have considered me very presumptuous to-day—"

Lady Harriette would have hazarded a disclaimer, but the clear and honest expression of the earnest eyes that were fastened upon her arrested the commonplace utterance.

“Be it so,” pursued her visitor; “I am content to remain under this implication. I may have suffered—I have—I have been made to feel that honest industry and commercial integrity are no equivalents for high birth and ancient descent. I had deceived myself, and I deserve my fate. I will never offend again; but if it should chance—and it might—that Geoffrey Goldworthy the manufacturer—you see, my lady, that I am willing to sink the neighbour and the landed-proprietor—If it should chance, I say, that it be ever in my power to serve the earl’s daughter or the baronet’s son, you may command me.”

Lady Harriette was preparing a proper reply to this assurance, but before she had put it into words, her visitor had bowed himself from the room, and was gone.

CHAPTER XII.

AN ARRIVAL.

It was no part of Lady Harriette Ashton's policy to permit Mr. Goldworthy to take offence, for she had already a vague idea that the time might not be so very far distant when his proffered good offices might be acceptable even to her and hers ; so, a day or two after the interview recorded in the last chapter, she dispatched a very courteous little note to the Park, requesting the pleasure of his company at dinner early in the ensuing week. Sir Hercules was glad to hear that she had done this ; for, less fastidious than his lady, he felt a certain respect for the frank, straightforward

Mr. Goldworthy, with his harmless self-appreciation and innocent little vanities ; and as no word was breathed to him on the purport of his neighbour's last visit, the baronet could welcome him without the restraint which he must otherwise have experienced.

There was much to be done, however, by the Lady of Ashton Court before the day of the dinner. The constant rumours which, as we have already stated, reached her on all sides of the colossal fortunes made or making throughout England through the medium of the several railways, haunted her day and night ; until she had succeeded in convincing herself that it was not only the interest, but even the duty, of her husband to repair his recent losses by the same means. Sir Hercules was, however, firm in his objections. He admitted that these extraordinary speculations might very probably enrich a few individuals ; but such only, he contended, as were unusually

long-headed, or utterly unscrupulous : men sufficiently accustomed to business to watch every chance, to calculate every contingency, and to save themselves in the event of failure ; or others, who being mere peniless adventurers caring little for their honour, were prepared to build up their own fortunes on the ruin of their victims, and to fill their pockets at the expense of their characters.

“ Now I, as you well know ;” he said ; “ am not a man of business, and am consequently not competent to compete with either dishonesty or artifice ; while, on the other hand, I trust that I am a man of honour ; and it therefore seems to me that I have no chance whatever in this great commercial gambling scheme.”

But still Lady Harriette persisted in assailing him with arguments which she considered unanswerable ; until weakened by illness, and spirit-wearied by her continual attacks, he made an effort to terminate the persecution by reminding her that, even were he disposed

to accede her to wishes, he had no ready money to apply to such a purpose.

Lady Harriette turned aside her head to conceal the smile of triumph which rose to her lip.

“And if the money could be procured, my dear Sir Hercules?”

“It cannot.”

“Well, but just suppose for the sake of argument, that it could?”

“Then I would make a better use of it;” was the unsatisfactory rejoinder.

Once more the plain honesty and good sense of the baronet baffled the diplomacy to which it was opposed.

Unhappily, however, at this very period a name became as a household word throughout the length and breadth of the land—the name of one who had realised, not his thousands, but his tens of thousands, in railway speculations; and upon whom his mammon-loving fellow-men gazed with admiring wonder and emulative envy. The public journals

prated of his 'whereabout' as though he had been one of the magnates of the land. He was presented with the freedom of his native city; addresses were presented to him as full of adulation as though he had made the fortunes of others instead of his own: tradesmen contended for his patronage, and estate-agents forwarded to him lithographic prints and water-coloured drawings of half the property on sale in the country; the proudest nobles were his guests; and invitations poured in on him from every side. The worship of the Golden Calf was the heresy of the greater proportion of the people; and because one keen-sighted and strong-willed individual was enriching himself from day to day, and from hour to hour, even men of sense and feeling shut their eyes to the fact that the pyramid upon which the gigantic idol had placed itself, must necessarily have been built up upon the ruin of hundreds.

The frightful contagion spread; and England became one great gamble. Those who

possessed capital—often hardly earned and carefully accumulated—risked it without misgiving in this new and fascinating speculation ; while many, less fortunate, raised money as they could, rather than be behind in the race of folly.

And among these—although not without considerable reluctance and self-reproach, was Sir Hercules Ashton. The constant entreaties and arguments of his wife, and the enthusiastic and confident representations of Mr. Goldworthy and others of his friends ultimately prevailed ; until at length, convinced that he was only doing his duty to his family, he wrote to Horace, informing him of the new and brilliant prospects which promised to make an El Dorado of England, and to enable every man who could raise capital to treble or quadruple his fortune. The reply of his son contained, as the baronet had anticipated, his full approval, and sanction of all such arrangements as his father should see fit to make ; and a short time subsequently Sir Hercules Ashton found himself in possession of a goodly

number of railway shares ; and almost as sanguine as his wife.

It was, indeed, wonderful to see the change which was wrought upon the sick man by this all-engrossing subject ; he roused himself from the inaction in which he had so long indulged to drive to the works, and watch the progress of the labourers who swarmed like bees on every side ; and after each of these visits he became more and more convinced of the prudence of the speculation. It seemed so impossible that an undertaking involving the welfare of so many hundreds could possibly fail ! Day by day the shares increased in value, and were in greater demand ; and more than once he could have disposed of his own most advantageously ; but it is rare indeed for a winning gamester to quit the table ; and so Sir Hercules, like his brother speculators, laughed at the idea of enriching others at his own expense.

As for Lady Harriette, nothing could exceed her self-gratulation, or the splendour of

her visions of future wealth ; although it is due to her to say that it was principally for her children, and especially for her son, that she coveted the hoards which she already clutched in imagination. For the first time in her life she almost succeeded in persuading herself that her high-soaring ambition appeared likely at last to be gratified ; for the letters of Horace were a sufficient proof of the solid profit which he was deriving from his travels ; while the admiration excited by her daughters was great enough to satisfy even a mother's heart.

Every thing, in short, appeared at this particular crisis to prosper at Ashton Court ; while Sir Hercules himself, under the excitement of his new pursuit, frequently forgot his gout for days together, and joined the family circle in the drawing-room.

But how, during this time of exultation and buoyant hope, sped the heroine of our tale ?

For her the present was one dreary monotony, and the future a blank. By her uncle

she was ever treated with affection and kindness, but as he was now comparatively independent of her care, she was not so continually in his society ; while by Lady Harriette, save when her services were required, she was entirely overlooked. To her cousins her good offices were essential, and freely rendered ; but, although when they were together, they were earnest in their expressions of acknowledgment and affection, the orphan could not deceive herself ; for it is not by words, however glowing, that sincere attachment manifests itself ; and there were none of those minor sacrifices on the part of Florence and Matilda, which cost so little, and gratify the recipient so much, and which are necessary to give weight to such professions.

Lady Harriette had been sincere in her assurance to Mr. Goldworthy that she was in no haste to part with her niece, for she had gradually but surely placed her precisely in that position in the family to which it had been her constant aim to reduce her from the moment in which

she ascertained her dependent situation ; while the baronet, trustfully looking forward to the time when he should be enabled, through his newly-acquired wealth, to give her such a marriage-portion as was befitting so near a relative, forgot that many things must be more essential to her happiness than mere money.

Fortunately, Sir Hercules possessed an extensive and well-selected library, to which Ella had access ; and as she scrupulously pursued the plan of study laid down for her by her judicious friend Madame Despreaux, she employed all the leisure hours afforded to her upon works admirably adapted to improve her mind, and to strengthen alike her heart and her understanding. Gradually, indeed, both may be said to have been in a great degree formed by books ; for there can be no doubt that the course of reading in youth, and especially in female youth, decides the after-character more powerfully than even external circumstances ; and thus she learnt in a great measure to

suffice to herself; and to endure without repining the trials to which she was subjected.

Let it not be imagined, however, for one moment, that this passive long-suffering grew out of a moral apathy which rendered her either blind to, or careless of, the unkindness of which she was the victim: far from such being the case, there were about her at times, although those around her knew it not, a wild energy, and a firm purpose, which only required opportunity to develop themselves. On the occasional appearance of the baronet in the family circle she formed one of the party; and although Lady Harriette rarely addressed her, still when she did so it was with sufficient urbanity to delude her husband into the belief that the three girls were equally dear to her; while the pursuits of the cousins were so similar, and the well-taught sisters so cautious in the presence of their father, that all their usual selfish exactions were carefully kept out of sight.

And so time passed on until the return of

Horace and his friends to England ; when, at the suggestion of Lady Harriette, who intimated to her son that it might be painful to Lord Elwood to return to the Chase until all the disorder caused by the railway operations on his estate was completely repaired, the three travellers arrived together at Ashton Court.

There was only one drawback to the joy of his mother as Horace folded her in his arms, and this arose from the conviction that she could no longer seclude her orphan niece as she had hitherto done ; and for an instant she asked herself whether it would not be possible to send her for a time from home. But where ? With the exception of Madame Despreaux, Ella had not a friend in the world ; and, for a merely temporary absence, a journey to the West of France was not to be thought of ; while, at the same time, she fortunately remembered that, deprived of the services of his niece, Sir Hercules must necessarily be dependent on those of his daughters ; an

innovation on their time which, with a vague hope at her heart that she was almost afraid to confess even to herself, she could not for a moment contemplate. To see one of her fair girls a peeress, she must be content to risk the rivalry of Ella in the affections of Frank Hatherston; and accordingly when her son, after having warmly greeted herself, and his father and sisters, enquired for his absent cousin, it was with perfect composure that she replied, "Ha! true, my dear boy; I see that Ella has made her escape; but she cannot be far off, as she was here, reading to Sir Hercules not half-an-hour ago."

Reassured by the smile and the tone of his mother; and without one lingering misgiving as to the present position of the orphan in his family, Horace proceeded to seek her; while Sir Hercules and Lady Harriette hastened to offer a gracious and graceful welcome to their two guests.

Lord Elwood was eloquent in his acknowledgments of the delicate kindness which had

prompted his invitation to Ashton Court ; nor did he shrink from confessing that he felt an almost boyish reluctance to contemplate for the first time the changes at the Chase.

“ I shall, however, soon become reconciled, I am sure ;” he said with a smile, which was nevertheless rather a sad one ; “ as the sacrifice which I may almost be said to have volunteered, has made me a happier man ; and I trust in some respects a wiser one. When I left England I knew little of life save its trials ; but during my absence I have been endeavouring to comprehend its duties.”

“ And those of a British nobleman are many and important, my dear lord ;” was the reply of the baronet ; “ nor do I doubt that you will ably fulfil them ; and meanwhile, I am delighted that you are once more among us, and that my son has secured so desirable a friend ; for, from what we have gathered from his letters, we have been led to hope that he may aspire to the honour of your regard.”

“ He is a fine young fellow, for whom I

have the feeling of an elder brother ;” said Lord Elwood ; “ and it is my firm conviction that had I sought throughout the country two eligible and pleasant travelling companions, I should not so completely have succeeded as I did through the happy accident which caused our meeting at Rome.”

There was a frank earnestness about the speaker which delighted the baronet. Hitherto he had known his noble neighbour rather from report than by personal acquaintanceship, and he had consequently been less able to appreciate his manliness and simplicity of character ; now, however, there was such an evident desire on his part to escape all the formalities of etiquette, and to identify himself with the family in which he was so unexpectedly domesticated, that the large heart of Sir Hercules at once warmed towards him ; and again he cordially wrung his hand, and requested him to look upon Ashton Court as his home so long as he felt it pleasant to make that home with them.

Algernon Elwood did not answer by a word,

but he looked earnestly into the face of the hospitable old man, comprehending in an instant his open and honest nature ; and then his eye wandered over the other individuals in the room, and rested for a second, but only for a second, upon one fair face.

CHAPTER XIII.

A COMPACT.

ALGERNON Lord Elwood, was, at the period of his return to England, in his twenty-sixth year, and singularly handsome. Large eyes of the deepest black contrasted admirably with an abundance of light brown hair, which, swept away from a broad and massive brow, fell in natural curls about his expressive and intellectual countenance. His features were finely moulded, the nose straight and somewhat prominent, the lips well-arched and flexible, and the chin smoothly rounded, and full of character. His figure was considerably above the middle height, slight, and muscular ; while

his hands and feet would have satisfied the most fastidious sculptor. There was, moreover, a fascination in his finely-modulated voice which greatly aided the impression produced by his general appearance ; while the man himself, both mentally and morally, was worthy of the fair exterior with which he had been gifted by nature.

Frank Hatherston, our old acquaintance, had fully redeemed, both in person and mind, the promise of his youth ; and was as noble-looking, and as graceful a young man as the eye could wish to light upon ; while his friend Horace had returned as gay, as buoyant, and as radiant with life and happiness as even Lady Harriette, with all her splendid visions of his future career, had ventured to anticipate.

And then the travellers had so much to tell ; so much that was new and strange to their listeners ; for at that period the East had not been invaded by railways, omnibuses, and yachting aristocrats, as it is in the present day ; steam had not entirely defied the elements ; and it

required both nerve and perseverance to explore the far-off wonders of those traditional lands, whose marvels are now taught by guide-books to the holiday tourist on his annual escape from his home-duties. They had collected, moreover, a perfect museum of curiosities, the nature and uses of most of which it was necessary to explain to those for whom they had been destined ; and it was really delightful to witness the earnestness of the teachers, and the attention of the pupils, whose rapid appreciation of each and all was rewarded by the possession of these, to them, priceless treasures.

Fortunately for the full and familiar intercourse of the little party, Lord Elwood was not altogether a stranger to the two elder Miss Ashtons, with whom he had frequently danced at the county balls, and dined at the tables of the county magnates, although he had never presumed upon this casual acquaintanceship to present himself at Ashton Court ; and it was with more than common alacrity therefore,

that he availed himself of the friendly overtures of Lady Harriette, (who was not slow in discovering what was the magnet by which he had been attracted to her house;) and induced to waive all considerations of ceremony and etiquette.

To say that she made this discovery with a feeling of unmitigated satisfaction would be an error, but still her ambition and her vanity were alike flattered; Lord Elwood had evidently never wavered between the two sisters, but had surrendered himself a captive to the high-spirited and laughter-loving Matilda. Himself somewhat sobered by the heavy responsibilities to which he had been subjected in very early life, he loved to bask in the sunshine of her joyous smile, and to listen to the glad accents of her cheerful voice; while that this was, moreover, no sudden preference, was proved to the anxious and watchful mother by the fact that the gems, tissues, and embroideries which he selected for Matilda's acceptance, had all been carefully chosen in consonance

with her peculiar style of beauty. It was certain therefore, she very naturally argued, that their noble neighbour had already felt a preference for her youngest daughter before he left England; a conviction which was moreover strengthened when she remembered how unexpectedly he had proposed himself as a travelling companion to her son, to whom he was previously almost unknown.

And Lady Harriette was right; but, hitherto surrounded by the difficulties from which he liberated himself through the medium of the railway, Lord Elwood had felt that as a man of honour he had no right to ask the hand of a young creature reared in luxury, whose family might perhaps, dazzled by his rank, induce her to accept his hand, and to share with him his hampered fortunes and his constant anxieties; and in this fact lay the solution of what had remained a mystery to many—his readiness to consent to what more than one wrong-headed country gentleman considered as the desecration of his ancestral

property—"I can plant out every offensive object;" he had murmured to himself; "and, after all, I merely share the mortification of many more high-born individuals than myself, who have been compelled to the sacrifice by which I am seeking to secure the happiness of my life." And how was that sacrifice already repaid when Horace Ashton, with his habitual frankness, laid before him the invitation of Lady Harriette.

Not a misgiving of her motive tended to deter him from instantly accepting it; he grasped at once the right hand of fellowship which was extended to him; and, assuredly, even the heart of young Ashton himself did not throb more tumultuously than his own with joyful anticipation, as the dusty travelling carriage passed the park-lodge, and drew up at the entrance of the venerable and time-honoured mansion of Sir Hercules.

Satisfied that her perspicuity had not failed her in the case of Lord Elwood, Lady Harriette very judiciously resolved not to interfere

either by word or look ; but the consideration that Matilda's lot in life was decided—for the evident gratification with which she received the attentions of the young lord was a sufficient evidence of her own feelings towards him—rendered her only the more solicitous to secure that of Florence ; Florence, who had in all things followed her advice, and obeyed her wishes with a docility which had occasionally been wanting in her sister ; but here she soon became painfully impressed by the utter failure of her cherished project. Hatherston had been lavish in his offerings to every member of the Ashton family save the orphan ; so lavish, indeed, that Lady Harriette had demurred, and the baronet had peremptorily refused to sanction the acceptance of such costly gifts, until assured by the young man that they were offered in the name of his uncle, who was anxious to prove his gratitude for the kindness which had been for so many years extended to himself ; and when, on this understanding, Sir Hercules was at length induced to

yield, his wife was at first inclined to consider the unequal distribution of the presents as a proof that his transitory admiration of Ella's talents, and suspicion of her own double-dealing, had passed from his memory; but she soon became convinced of her mistake, when the same circumstance which had led her to discover the attachment of Lord Elwood for Matilda, became equally apparent in the proceedings of Frank towards the orphan. To her he had brought neither jewel nor ornament of any kind; a few graceful and curious toys, and a huge collection of manuscript music, all written by his own hand, and combining the popular and national melodies of every land which he had visited during his travels, were his sole offering to the orphan. It was clear, therefore, that he had but too well remembered the nature of her pursuits, and the little value which she placed on mere personal adornment. He had bestowed upon her daughters gifts that would be appreciated by the world in which they loved to shine; but to the obscure rela-

tive whom she once more began to consider as her evil genius, he had devoted hours of time which must have been doubly precious to him under such circumstances.

And what had been the conduct of Horace to his cousin? We have already mentioned that he had no sooner received the welcome of those members of the family who were assembled to receive him, than he hastened to claim that of the absent one for whom he had looked in vain; nor was it long ere he found her, and was satisfied by the light which danced in her eye, and the blush which mantled in her cheek as he extended his hand, that the feeling by which each had been engrossed when they parted, was still as warm and sincere as ever.

“Ella!”

“Horace!”

And in the next instant she was folded to his heart.

The young man had not paused an instant to gaze upon the richly-developed beauty

which he had once believed could never know an increase. It was Ella—the orphan cousin whom he had loved from his boyhood,—and that sufficed him ; but as he at length raised her blushing face from his shoulder, the look which he turned upon her was long and rapturous, and he swept his hand across his eyes as though doubting the reality of so bright a vision.

And in this doubt he might fairly be forgiven, for throughout all his wanderings he had never looked upon anything so lovely. Oriental in her flexibility and grace, she was European in the intellect and tenderness of her expression ; not a feature which was not faultless ; not a movement which was not harmonious ; while her voice, low, full, and soft, fell upon his ear like the strain of distant music.

Her beauty was so bewildering that for a few instants Horace could not articulate a word ; he only gazed at her as though his whole being were concentrated in that gaze ;

and then he once more drew her to his heart, and held her there as though he feared that the glorious illusion would vanish.

“Still my own !” he at length murmured ; “Only say that you are still my own bright, beautiful Ella ! Let me hear you assure me that you are unchanged ; and the devotion of my whole heart”—

“Do not forget the conditions upon which I consented to listen to words that you should perhaps never have uttered when we parted ;” whispered the orphan tenderly, as she pillowed her head upon his shoulder ; “remember that although my boy-lover has returned to his ancestral home a man, yet that we are still both dependent upon the will of others. It is not for me to forget this, dear Horace ; nor would you, I am quite sure, ask me to repay the kindness and protection for which I am indebted to my uncle by robbing him of his only son. I have thought constantly and deeply of this truth during your absence ; but the sudden joy of seeing you once more

beside me, has betrayed me into an imprudence of which I ought not to have been guilty."

"Then you have ceased to love me, Ella?"

"Do not be ungenerous, dear cousin; rather tell me who I have to love on earth save yourself?"

"All the better!" was the impetuous reply; "For now I see you again, I feel that had it been otherwise I never could have hoped for your affection."

"Dear Horace, what can you mean by such wild words? Were you not the ready champion of the ungainly child who found a home under your father's roof? Have you not been the steady and unchanged friend of her somewhat desolate girlhood? Think you that she can forget all this?"

"It is not gratitude that I ask of you, Ella;" said the young man impatiently; "even had I done anything to deserve it. You are trifling with my feelings in talking of the past."

"Well then, dear Horace;" was the meek reply of the orphan; "we will speak of the

present ; and let us both resolve so to act in this present that we may not fear to look into the future."

" And why should we fear the future ?"

" Because, my dear cousin, you forget in yielding to the feelings of your own heart—and perhaps, of mine also"—she added with a deep blush ; " how little our marriage would meet the views of Lady Harriette, even should my kind and less ambitious uncle look upon it with favour. A brilliant career is before *you*, while I am alike poor and obscure. We will talk no more on this topic, Horace, until I hear from your mother's own lips that she is willing to receive me as a daughter."

" You must recal those words, Ella ;" exclaimed her cousin impetuously ; " for you are well aware that so long as there exists a duke's daughter in the land whose hand she has the faintest hope of obtaining for me, she will be inexorable ; but surely the consent of my father—"

" No, my dear cousin ;" interposed the orphan, as the large tears rained down her

cheeks, and fell upon the hand which clasped her own; "You have seen my weakness, but now you shall also see that I can be strong in a sense of right. How long and how well I have loved you, it were idle to repeat; but I should be unworthy of your affection (my greatest earthly treasure!) were I to sacrifice principle to passion. I can wait and watch—bear and suffer—do any thing, in short, save incur my own self-reproach, and feel myself lowered in your eyes."

"*That* you could never be;" said the young man earnestly; "the whole happiness of my life is in your hands, and you have no right to wreck it by indulging in a morbid feeling of exaggerated delicacy. I do not want a wife for the world, but for my home. I have the prospect of high rank: the almost certainty, as my father assures me, of great wealth; and I am therefore perfectly justified in preferring my own happiness to the empty prejudices of society. Besides, you appear to have forgotten that you are my near relative;

a member of my family ; and that consequently—”

“ Believe me I have forgotten nothing ;” said Ella sadly ; “ not even, my dear Horace, that save by your father and yourself I am no longer regarded in the light of a relative, but in that of a dependent : and such I am in truth and in fact. This circumstance alone appears to me to raise an impassable barrier between us, for I feel satisfied that Lady Harriette will never forget—”

“ Ella, my will is strong as well as yours ;” interrupted her cousin in his turn ; “ After all, Sir Hercules Ashton is master in his own house, while in a few months I shall be of age ; and then let me see if even my own mother will longer dare to treat you as she has hitherto done.”

“ Horace ! Horace ! Now, indeed, I am cruelly punished for my imprudence—my selfishness—” exclaimed the orphan, springing from her seat, and sinking on her knees before him with her hands clasped ; and her

large lustrous eyes gleaming with a strange light which he had never yet seen in them, and which thrilled him to the very soul; “Instantly retract that dreadful, that unnatural threat, or here I swear to you that I will leave my uncle’s house, and seek a home among strangers; where, or with whom, I care not; but you shall never hear of me more. I cannot—I dare not—I will not—be the cause of strife under the roof of my benefactor—of the brother of my father.”

“Be calm, Ella, and rise;” murmured her cousin, awed by this wild burst of passion; “I will do anything, every thing you wish, if you will only be calm; but your cold determination to exact an impossibility drove me half mad; and when I reflect on all that you have already suffered, you can scarcely wonder that, loving you as I do, I should be anxious to secure both your happiness and my own.”

“Happiness was never born of strife, Horace;” said the orphan, struggling to smile; “let us both endeavour to forget that those

fearful words were ever uttered ; save, indeed, it be to remind us of the respect and duty which we owe to those to whom we are indebted for every thing. Will you promise me this, Horace ?” she asked pleadingly ; “ and will you pledge yourself to act in the same spirit ?”

“ I will do my best to obey you, Ella, though the trial will be a bitter one ; but never even to speak to you of my affection—”

“ I need no assurances, dear Horace ; and in the event of a disappointment which appears only too certain, it will be far better for me—for both of us—that we should look upon each other only as dear and fast friends, united by even more than the common attachment of relatives, but still friends, and friends only.”

Subtle sophistry of a young heart, how ingenious is it in its work of self-deception ! The orphan firmly believed that her words were calculated to prepare the mind of her cousin to submit to whatever fate might be

before him ; while she was in fact drawing still closer the bond between them by admitting that, even while they were to forego the delightful privilege of lovers, that of dwelling constantly upon their mutual affection, they were still to remember that they were more than friends—more than relatives—that for them there was an inner world, an inner life, into which none around them could intrude.

At length they parted ; there was one last embrace, permitted by the orphan because it was to be the last ; and then Horace, as a pledge of his submission to her will, threw over the neck of his cousin a delicate chain of Maltese gold, to which was appended a small cross.

“ Remember ! ” whispered Ella, as she laid her slender finger upon the ornament ; and the next moment she was alone.

CHAPTER XIV.

A LOAN.

"BUT, my dear Goldworthy, this is both unexpected and inconvenient;" said Sir Hercules Ashton, rubbing down the throbbing limb through which there had just darted a sudden and violent spasm of pain; "I was really not prepared for such an event."

"Nor were we, my good friend;" was the reply; "for we had so thoroughly made up our minds that, after the heavy sum of compensation money paid by the Company to Lord Elwood, he would as a matter of course purchase largely, that we never contemplated so heavy a call. As, however, his lordship has resolutely refused to become a shareholder, we

have no alternative, for we require funds to carry on the works ; and a little present sacrifice will be amply repaid by future profits."

"Nevertheless, I feel that I have acted imprudently ;" said the baronet with visible discomposure ; " I should have remembered the possibility at least, of such an application, and have reserved the means to meet it ; whereas I have foolishly thrown all my ready money into the speculation, and have consequently only increased my liabilities."

" I am truly sorry in that case ;" said the new Director somewhat pompously ; " that the call should be rather a heavy one ; but you see, my dear Sir Hercules, that these things are inevitable in the infancy of every great undertaking. England owes her prosperity to the enterprise of the speculative portion of her community ; and splendid results cannot be obtained without adequate beginnings. We cannot therefore afford to be stopped in our operations from want of money, when that

money can be raised by lawful and legitimate means."

"I am quite ready to concede that point ;" was the rather querulous rejoinder of his companion ; "but you must also remember, my good sir, that when you urged me to take the last two hundred shares, you gave me no reason to suppose that any demand would be made upon me for months to come, or I never should have been persuaded to exceed my first venture ; for, even with my income, it appears to me that should such an occurrence as this frequently take place, it may prove very embarrassing ; and, now that I come to think of it, you will much oblige me by disposing of the said two hundred shares, the proceeds of which will enable me to pay up the call upon the remainder without further trouble or annoyance."

"Dispose of them, Sir Hercules !" exclaimed Mr. Goldworthy, lifting up his hands in amazement ; "why surely you cannot contemplate such a thing !"

“On the contrary, my mind is quite made up on the subject ;” said the baronet ; “I am really too much indisposed just at present to be worried by money-matters, and am convinced that I could not pursue a wiser course.”

“But who, my dear sir, do you think ;” enquired the manufacturer, better versed in business transactions than his companion ; “who do you possibly think would purchase shares upon which there was at the moment a heavy, a very heavy call? Of course they would fetch nothing on ’Change, especially as they must remain for some time to come at a discount. At the present moment the investment would be decidedly a bad one ; but we who hold them look forward to better times, and those times will soon come, rely on it. We are only sowing our seed now, and we must wait for the harvest.”

“Then am I to understand ;” asked the baronet, more and more disturbed by the light which was beginning to break in upon his

darkness ; “ that the shares are absolutely unsaleable ; and, consequently, worthless ? ”

“ Certainly—decidedly so for the moment—but only for the moment. Take my advice, Sir Hercules, pay them up, and the time is not far distant when you will have reason to thank me for such advice.”

“ I confess that at this moment I feel more inclined to throw them up than to pay them up ; ” said the invalid bitterly ; “ the fact is that I ought never to have suffered myself to be persuaded into so great a folly as that of entering into a speculation about which I understood nothing. However, regrets are now useless, and the money must be paid, therefore I will make immediate arrangements to that effect.”

“ You have decided wisely, Sir Hercules Ashton ; ” said his visitor as he rose to depart ; “ and I trust and believe that a few months hence our shares will be at a premium, as we have now nearly reached a flat of several miles in extent, which will greatly diminish

our expenses, and expedite the completion of the works ; after which all will be plain-sailing, our mine will be sprung, and we shall have nothing to do but to reap the fruits of our enterprise."

And having uttered his metaphorical trilogy with the air of a man somewhat overwhelmed by the magnificence of his own eloquence, Mr. Goldworthy grasped the hand of his host, shook it vehemently, mounted his horse, and rode home, full of self-gratulatory exultation at his admirable management of a very delicate affair.

He left poor Sir Hercules, however, in a very different state of mind. It was, as he had at once frankly admitted, not only very difficult, but almost impossible for him to raise the large sum required from him without a considerable sacrifice ; and he could not bring himself to decide what the nature of that sacrifice should be. Still it was evident that a sum nearly amounting to two thousand pounds must be raised, and *that* immediately,

or his shares would be forfeited, and all his hopes crushed at a blow.

But how ?

The baronet was still revolving this vexed question, and as far from arriving at any conclusion as ever, when Lady Harriette, having ascertained that Mr. Goldworthy had left the house, entered the room to ascertain upon what errand he had come to Ashton Court ; whence he had departed without any attempt to pay his respects to the ladies of the family.

The tale was soon told ; and his wife, for a brief interval, looked as much annoyed and perplexed as himself. Suddenly, however, her brow brightened, and with a smile of self-gratulation at her own superior sagacity she said quietly :

“ Well, my dear Sir Hercules, the difficulty may be easily overcome. Have you forgotten the money which you invested for your niece ? Surely you cannot hesitate for an instant to make use of it in such an emergency ! In the first place it is in point of fact your own ;

but still, if you have any scruples on the subject, you have only to pay Miss Ella Ashton five per cent. interest until you replace it, instead of the three which she is now receiving, and she will then be a gainer by the arrangement."

"But if, after all, this speculation should prove a failure?" asked the baronet uneasily.

"Why then indeed;" was the reluctant reply of Lady Harriette; "you might perhaps feel it right to repay the money, which you could always do from your own income; but no one save yourself appears to entertain an apprehension on the subject."

We have already sufficiently shewn, or we have failed in our attempt, that Sir Hercules Ashton, although a good, was a weak man, and the scheme was a tempting one; still he had scruples, but they were soon silenced by his wife; and he eventually consented to adopt her advice, provided Ella herself became a consenting party.

A smile of scorn passed over the lip of

Lady Harriette as she listened to the reservation. The consent of the helpless girl who, as she proudly imagined shrank before her frown, could not for a moment be doubted; and she accordingly resolved that the question should at once be laid at rest. Quietly moving to the bell, she desired the servant by whom it was answered to summon Miss Ella Ashton, and in a few minutes the orphan stood before her.

“Sir Hercules has sent for you, my dear;” she said in her blandest accents; “on a little affair of business. I have assured him that it was quite unnecessary; but he is so extremely conscientious in all matters of the kind, that, much as you will be benefitted by the arrangement which he contemplates, he would not consent to adopt it without your concurrence. You are aware that not many months after your arrival amongst us, he realised the slender property which you brought with you to England, and invested the proceeds in your name. Now, the bank only allows you three

per cent. for your money ; and as your uncle is anxious to further your interests as far as lies in his power, he has decided, should his proposal be agreeable to yourself, to take your money into his own hands, and to allow you five per cent., by which you will ultimately be a considerable gainer. Now, my dear girl, what do you say to our project?"

"I say, madam, if I am indeed to have a voice in the matter;" was the calm reply ; "that I would rather not increase my own little fortune at the expense of my uncle."

The baronet evidently underwent a sharp twinge as she spoke, for he began to stroke his ankle with more than usual vehemence.

"Make yourself perfectly easy on that score;" replied her interlocutor with an amiability of look and tone which perfectly bewildered the orphan ; "as although you will profit by the arrangement, it will not in any way injure the interests of Sir Hercules."

"In that case, madam;" said Ella ; "I can only express my gratitude for his

kindness, and place myself entirely in his hands."

"But you shall only do so on a clear understanding of the facts, my dear child;" exclaimed the baronet with a heightened colour, and in a somewhat unsteady voice; "The truth is, Ella, that I have at the present moment the greatest need of a sum of money, which I find it difficult to raise in the short period allowed to me; and if you have sufficient confidence in my affection for you to accede to my proposal, you will confer a favor upon me which I am not likely to forget."

"My dear, kind uncle;" murmured the happy girl, as she stole to his side, and pressed his hand to her lips; "surely it was unnecessary under such circumstances even to mention the subject to me. Had it not been for you—"

She could say no more, but the tears which rolled rapidly down her cheeks were more eloquent than words.

And thus Sir Hercules was relieved from

his embarrassment; and if he did feel considerable compunction when he found himself in possession of the slender provision which he had been enabled to make for his orphan niece, it is equally certain that he did not entertain a single misgiving as to the ultimate effect of the arrangement upon her interests.

The shares were paid up to the infinite satisfaction of the Directors; the line began to stretch across the level; and every thing was as promising as the most sanguine spirit could desire. Ella was proud and happy in the consciousness of having relieved her uncle from anxiety; and almost hopeful of brighter days as she remarked the altered manner of Lady Harriette. There was a new trial awaiting her, however, for which she was unprepared.

CHAPTER XV.

LOVE AND LOVERS.

SEVERAL weeks had gone by, and still Lord Elwood lingered at Ashton Court ; although, accompanied by Horace and his sisters, who were both accomplished horsewomen, he had paid several visits to the Chase, without appearing particularly saddened by the plebeian innovations which it had undergone. His fair friends, who had hitherto had no opportunity of exploring the noble mansion, were enthusiastic in their admiration, not only of the ancient pile itself, but also of the treasures of art which it contained ; not the least interesting to the present party, being a portrait of Lord

Elwood as a boy, painted by Lawrence. Then Matilda was half wild with delight as she wandered through the spacious conservatories, which had been the pride of the late mistress of the Chase; and the choicest and rarest of whose contents were profusedly gathered for her gratification.

To both the girls, indeed, it was fairy-land; and its owner never wearied of leading his delighted companions to every object worthy of remark; nor did one observation uttered by Matilda, as in joyousness of heart she suggested how charmingly a grotto would terminate this dark walk, or the glorious view from that high ground be enjoyed if a rustic temple were built upon the summit, fell unheeded on his ear.

Often their ride was shared by Frank Hatherston, for he too had evinced no disposition to disregard the entreaties of Sir Hercules that he would prolong his visit; but he occasionally excused himself from joining the party, greatly to the mortification of Lady Harriette,

who was by no means satisfied with the progress of events in his peculiar case. Ella, (who since the arrival of the travellers, and the incident mentioned in the last chapter, had almost assumed in the family the position which should never have been denied to her,) occupied, as the astute lady was at no loss to perceive, all the time and attention which she would fain have seen devoted to her eldest daughter; and while the joyous equestrians were gaily cantering over hill and dale, Hatherston and the orphan spent hours in the music-room, to the great delight of Sir Hercules, who was never weary of listening to the magnificent voice of his niece, blent with that of his accomplished guest.

In spite of himself, moreover, the severe check which he had received at the very outset of his somewhat rash venture had greatly subdued the sanguine anticipations of the worthy baronet; while the insidious attacks of his old enemy began to recur more frequently than they had latterly done; and it

was consequently a great gratification to him when Hatherston, with an earnestness which enhanced the kindness, instead of seeking for amusement and occupation more congenial to his age and disposition, shared with Ella the duties of the sick-room. No one, as he declared, could read like Frank ; and when the paper was laid aside, he had such a store of anecdote and adventure that the invalid never knew a weary hour ; and as he occasionally dropped into a sleep in the midst of one of his young friend's best stories, he did so with the pleasant conviction that on his awaking he should find him still at his side ready to conclude the tale, while Ella was plying her needle or her pencil in the recess of the bay window.

Poor Sir Hercules ! he had forgotten Lady Harriette.

As if by tacit consent, the orphan and Hatherston never exchanged a sentence while the baronet slept. Immediately he had convinced himself that such was the case, the young man took up a book ; and if he forgot

to turn over its pages, it was probably because he found a more pleasant occupation in his own thoughts. At times his curiosity was excited by the shade of sadness, which occasionally stole over the beautiful face before him, but he endeavoured to convince himself that it was solely caused by the irksomeness of her position in her uncle's family, and that it *might* be reserved for him to banish it for ever.

That he had not received the slightest encouragement to believe that Ella looked upon his attentions, marked as they were, in any other light than as those of a kind-hearted and amiable young man, many of whose tastes and pursuits assimilated with her own, did not disturb his hopes for a moment; he had studied her character deeply, and found in its truthfulness and simplicity a sufficient assurance that she would never condescend to sacrifice her sense of self-respect by the common coquetries of her sex and age; and, remembering how nearly he had wrecked his happiness when captivated by the loveliness of Florence,

he was the more attracted towards the gentle and somewhat pensive orphan, who had never, either by word or look, betrayed the least consciousness of his preference.

Poor Frank! He little suspected all the workings of the young, pure heart which he trusted one day, and that no very distant day, to win. He guessed not at its struggles, at its high resolves, and at its womanly weakness. He knew not how it was striving to crush out its best and brightest hopes, and to resign itself to the cold, dull monotony of an unloved existence; he never surmised how many bitter tears that calm, uncomplaining girl shed in secret over the one bright, and as she too surely felt blighted, dream of her early womanhood. How should he? For years he had been aware that her life was one of seclusion, neglect, and self-abnegation; and, consequently, it never once occurred to him that she might have other and deeper reasons for a sadness which had become almost constitutional.

Where woman truly loves how jealously she guards her secret ! A passing prepossession may be betrayed by words, even by tears ; but where the feeling has sunk deep, and nestled itself in the very heart's core, it is as securely concealed as the jewel in an unworked mine. Pebbles and sand lie upon the surface, but the gem is hidden until its value has been ascertained and acknowledged ; and thus is it ever with the best and holiest affections of a woman's heart.

That the present state of things was gall and wormwood to Lady Harriette must be sufficiently apparent ; and after having reflected carefully upon the subject, she resolved to prevent the constant intercourse which had hitherto been permitted between her niece and her guest ; although she at once felt that it would require considerable tact to effect such a change without any appearance of design on her own part ; and at length, having determined upon the course which she conceived to be the most advisable, she em-

braced every opportunity of expressing to the orphan, when by some rare chance they were alone together, the high sense which she entertained of her confidence in her uncle's affection, and how much her own had in consequence increased towards herself. Where she had been accustomed to command she simply consulted; and the result of her policy may be gathered from the partial contents of a letter addressed about this period by Ella to her absent friend, the excellent Madame Despreaux.

“And now that I have endeavoured to express to you all that was in my heart about yourself, my second mother, I must tell you of our proceedings at Ashton. Dull as I am in such matters, I think that I cannot be mistaken in my hope that our guest Lord Elwood has formed a sincere affection for Matilda; indeed, he seems to make no effort to conceal it; and more than once Lady Harriette has dropped hints, which, had I permitted myself to inquire her meaning, would

I feel convinced have strengthened me in my conviction. I am truly glad of this ; as from all I have ever heard of his lordship, he is as noble by nature as by birth. Meanwhile, I fear that Lady Harriette is disappointed in what we both know to have been her wishes regarding Mr. Hatherston, for he appears to the full as much interested in the one sister as the other ; and I confess to you that should such really be the case (and I see no reason to doubt it), I cannot conceive why he remains here ; for, conscious as he must be of a change in his own feelings, his position cannot fail to be an unpleasant, even if not actually a difficult one as regards my aunt. But so it is, and a great comfort his society has proved to my good uncle, to whom he devotes several hours each day, without one symptom of weariness, although Lord Elwood and my cousins are constantly making excursions in every direction.

“As for myself, I should be most ungrateful did I utter one complaint ; and

although you, my kind friend, from whom I have no secrets, considered me rash in that little affair about the money, I think that were you to see the altered demeanour of Lady Harriette towards me, you would approve what I have done. Formerly, when my cousins were absent, she left me either to the solitude of my own room, or in attendance on Sir Hercules as a mere matter of course ; but now she makes me the companion of her drives ; and as I do not accompany her in her visits, but remain in the carriage during her absence, I always provide myself with a book, which I greatly enjoy ; and perhaps the more so that I have lately felt somewhat of restraint when I have found myself alone with Mr. Hatherston in my uncle's sick room, during his long and frequent fits of slumber. It is weak to do so, I know, for we never converse on such occasions, but are each occupied in our own way ; still, I have for so many years been accustomed to find myself alone when my services were not required by others, that

it is irksome to me to have my cherished solitude invaded even by so pleasant and considerate an intruder."

It was quite evident to the Frenchwoman, as she mused over the artless letter of her favourite, what was the nature of the magnet which had attracted, and still bound Mr. Hatherston to Ashton; and she forthwith began to build cloud-castles, which would have perfectly satisfied her of the correctness of her surmises, had she not suddenly seen them dispersed into thin air by the simple fact that, although Ella had written at great length, the name of her cousin Horace did not once occur throughout the letter.

Despite her disclaimer, it was therefore at once evident to the quicksighted governess that the orphan had at least one secret from her. She loved the son of Sir Hercules; but was her affection returned? And would the haughty Lady Harriette ever consent to his marriage with a niece whom she had rendered absolutely penniless?—for that the loan upon

which she had very severely commented when it was communicated to her by Ella, had been instigated by her aunt, she had instantly decided in her own mind.

Never had she felt so unhappy about the generous-minded and richly-gifted girl as she did, while with the letter lying in her lap, she pondered over its details ; nor was it long ere the whole scheme of Lady Harriette's policy lay bare before her. She thoroughly comprehended the mystery of the sudden consideration displayed by the wily mother for the gratification of one whom she had during so many weary years neglected and coerced ; and the lip of the largehearted woman quivered with contempt as she murmured to herself :

“I see it all, Miladi ; I see it all. They were too much together ; and little suspecting that the young affections of your victim were already bestowed elsewhere, you would separate them. Well, play your game, *Madame la Châtelaine* ; but rest assured that you do

not hold all the winning cards in your own hand ; and that although *ce petit Monsieur* may not make my Ella his wife, neither will he ever become the husband of your daughter Florence ; for no man who has intellect and fine feeling sufficient to appreciate the mental and moral worth of the one, will ever worship at the empty and worldly shrine of the other.— But this attachment to Horace—to the heir of the house—for she does love him, or she would never thus have shrunk from the mention of his name, *that* is a graver matter. Alas ! my poor Ella, to what trials may you not still be reserved.”

CHAPTER XVI.

A MORAL SUNRISE.

HITHERTO Frank Hatherston had been satisfied to live on from day to day in a little paradise of his own creation. Permitted to spend hours in the society of the orphan, whose admirable qualities and extraordinary attainments satisfied his judgment while they enthralled his heart; and subjugated by a loveliness which he had never yet seen equalled, he suffered himself to drink deep of the intoxicating draught of passion, without dreaming that the cup of happiness might be dashed even from his very lips. What had he to fear? Ella had been isolated from

the world, and consequently *could* not have formed any other attachment. She was not appreciated by any member of her family, for even the worthy Sir Hercules himself was unable to value her aright; she was a formidable rival to her less gifted cousins, and therefore an obstacle to be removed from their path; ergo: whenever he presented himself as a candidate for her hand, he had every confidence that his suit would be acceptable to all parties; and having reasoned himself into this pleasant conviction, Frank believed that he had nothing more to do than by every effort in his power, to awaken the slumbering sensibilities of a heart rich in all the finer and better feelings of our nature. Too delicate to attempt this feat by the poor and puerile artifices of a mere worldling, or the lip-deep flatteries of a shallow coxcomb; and far too proud to owe her consent to the arguments and representations of her relatives, he was content to win his way to her esteem by his more solid qualities: to teach her to respect him as a man

to whose safeguard she might fearlessly confide her future destiny ; and then to claim the prize that he had won, and wear it worthily.

As regarded his own position, all was clear before him. His uncle, (a confirmed old bachelor, conscious in the decline of life of the error of which he had been guilty in believing that man could ever suffice to himself, and find happiness in his own selfish and unshared gratification ; and, moreover, desirous of seeing his name perpetuated, and his wealth rendered a mean of blessedness to others ;) was, as he well knew, anxious that he should contract an early marriage ; and would be quite satisfied by the substitution of one Miss Ashton for the other.

No cloud therefore gathered upon his heart's horizon, for that he was not disagreeable to Ella he felt convinced ; while that she treated him with a friendship and confidence which she had not extended even to Lord Elwood, he had long been conscious ; and,

consequently, he lived on in the pleasant hope to which he had delivered himself up, forgetting that his prolonged residence at Ashton Court had exceeded all reasonable limits, and wilfully overlooking the fact that he had once had other views which had been fathomed by his hostess; until he was aroused from his dream of security by the constant obstacles which were suddenly opposed to his intercourse with the object of his affection.

Instead of the daily hours which he had formerly spent in her society, he now barely passed a few moments in her presence, save when she was surrounded by the other members of the family; their musical studies were discontinued, the presence of the baronet being rendered impossible by a fresh attack of gout which most opportunely, as Lady Harriette considered, confined him once more to his own sitting-room; while she was herself too much occupied to bear them company; and, as we have shown, she now never left

the house without claiming the society of her niece.

The first feeling of Hatherston was one of irritation. He had become so thoroughly habituated to his present dreamy state of happiness that he felt himself injured by its sudden interruption, which he at first attributed to accident; but ere long he became convinced that it was occasioned by some more tangible cause; nor was he long in discovering its nature. The visible self-gratulation of Lady Harriette betrayed her agency in his annoyance; and stung by her duplicity, which was rendered still more distasteful by an ostentatious increase of attention and kindness towards himself, he resolved to terminate all further suspense upon the subject of his hopes by an appeal to Sir Hercules.

The opportunity presented itself at once. As the party rose from the luncheon-table, at which the two elder Miss Ashtons had appeared in their riding-dresses, ready to mount when the horses should be brought round

Lady Harriette said with her most gracious smile: "You will of course join the sight-seers to-day on their delightful excursion, my dear Mr. Hatherston. You have not yet, I think, visited Beauchamp Abbey, which is decidedly the finest ruin in the county. Have you ordered your horse?"

"I wish my friends all possible pleasure during their ride, and am grateful to your ladyship for your kindness;" was the reply; "but having promised to read the debates to Sir Hercules this morning, I would not on any account disappoint him."

"Ella and myself drive to the post-town to make some purchases;" remarked the lady settling her bracelets: "Can we execute any little commission for you?"

"You leave me so little to wish under your roof, Lady Harriette;" said Frank with a slight bow; "that, much as I am obliged by your consideration, I am not conscious of a single want which even you could at the present moment gratify."

“In that case ;” laughed his hostess ; “I shall leave you without remorse in the keeping of Sir Hercules ; although I really cannot help feeling distressed that he should absorb so much of your time. At your age it is an unreasonable sacrifice.”

“I have never yet considered it as such, Lady Harriette.”

“Well, all I can say is that it is a marvellous instance of self-denial on your part, most courteously displayed ;” and she laughed again ; “for there is so little to attract in a sick room, that I believe the young generally consider it as a sort of penance to pass even a single hour in such an atmosphere. Sir Hercules is indeed happy in having inspired you with so warm an interest.”

“I owe both gratitude and respect to Sir Hercules, Madam ; and am fortunate to be enabled so easily to prove my sense of his great kindness.”

“So be it then, my dear young friend ; and now, Ella, go and put on your bonnet and

shawl, for the carriage will be round in ten minutes, and you know that I have an objection to be kept waiting."

When the ladies had withdrawn, Hatherston accompanied the riding-party to the hall, and as soon as the horses were brought to the door, assisted Florence to mount, while Lord Elwood performed the same office for her sister; but while Matilda was all smiles and sunshine, the brow of her sister was clouded, and her acknowledgments were coldly expressed. Her vanity was, perhaps naturally, hurt that Frank, who had once devoted himself to her service, and been eager to secure a place at her side, should prefer a dreary *tête-à-tête* with her father to her own society on such an occasion as this; and she began to be apprehensive that her mother had indeed spoken truly when she warned her that her cousin would prove a formidable rival in the affections of Frank Hatherston. Yet Ella would also be absent; *that* at least was satisfactory; and Florence tried to believe that, such being the

case, she could not have influenced him in this instance. Still she was considerably ruffled; not that her heart was interested in the matter, but she considered herself aggrieved; and consequently when Horace, half playfully and half seriously, expostulated with his friend upon what he called his desertion, she did not utter a word, but gathering up her reins, cantered after Matilda and Lord Elwood who had already ridden off. Shaking his clenched hand in affected anger at the immovable Hatherston, Horace followed in his turn; and having seen them disappear down the avenue, Frank re-entered the house.

Sir Hercules was anxiously awaiting him, and the debates were duly read and discussed, greatly to the gratification of the baronet, who, like many other old gentlemen who have done nothing for their country save inhabit it, considered himself a thorough politician. Hatherston read admirably, a talent by no means so common as many people suffer themselves to suppose; and a couple of hours passed away

very agreeably to both parties; but at the termination of that period the young man began to feel considerably less interest in the budget and the corn bill, and became particularly fidgetty. Lady Harriette, as he was well aware, never failed after a temporary absence from her home, to visit the sick room of her husband: it looked well, and she always liked to keep up appearances; and as he was not aware of the nature of her business at the post-town, which was only six miles from Ashton Court, he began to be apprehensive that it might not detain her long enough to enable him to explain his views and wishes to her husband. Still, the subject was a delicate one to introduce; while from some cause or other, a vague apprehension had grown upon Hatherston that his wooing might not proceed altogether so smoothly as he had for some time accustomed himself to hope; and thus he felt nervous and unhinged.

Fortunately Sir Hercules himself came to the rescue.

“ I am really very much obliged to you, my dear Hatherston, very much obliged indeed ;” he said as the young man laid down the “ Times ;” “ and if my little Ella had been here, I should have had a glorious morning ; but I have become so accustomed to have her near me that when she is elsewhere I feel as if something were wanting.”

“ I am by no means surprised to hear that such is the case, Sir Hercules ;” said the young man ; “ but still I do not for a moment doubt, that in order to increase her happiness you would be ready to forego the gratification of her society.”

“ Why yes, yes ; I have no wish to sacrifice her to my selfishness ;” conceded the baronet ; “ and as Lady Harriette considers it necessary to her health that she should take carriage exercise, it is quite right and proper that she should do so.”

“ True ; but I was speaking of a more permanent separation. You cannot, you know, hope to keep so beautiful and gifted

a creature as your niece always at Ashton Court."

"And where else should she be, but under the roof of her old uncle?"

"Why, my dear sir, it strikes me that she might exchange it for that of her husband."

"What! *that* child."

"Young ladies of eighteen do not, I believe, usually consider themselves children;" smiled Frank; "and certainly their male friends do not look upon them as such."

"And pray, Mr. Frank Hatherston;" asked the baronet with a gravity which was negatived by the twinkle in his eye; "how came you to be so accurately informed of the age of my niece?"

"Because, Sir Hercules;" said the young man with a slight tremor in his voice; "nothing relating to Miss Ella Ashton can be indifferent to me. In short, my dear sir, I love her; love her most devotedly; with all the fervour of a heart which has long been

wholly hers ; and I now entreat of you, should you consider me worthy of what I ask, to sanction my endeavour to gain her affections. To herself I have not ventured to utter a syllable upon the subject, for I did not feel myself justified, as a man of honour, in seeking to rob you of such a treasure until you had given me your permission to make the attempt. My obligations to yourself are great and many, but credit me when I assure you that I will strive—not to cancel them, for that I should indeed regret to do—but to prove my sense of their extent by straining every nerve to secure the happiness of your niece. You have known me long, Sir Hercules ; may I hope that you will not discountenance my suit ?”

“ My dear boy, you astonish me !” exclaimed the baronet ; “ You do, indeed ! Who could ever have foreseen this ? It is the most extraordinary—and yet, perhaps, it is no more than might have been expected after all. Children grow into men and women before

old folks have time to remark it ; but really——”

“ My dear Sir Hercules !” urged Frank earnestly.

“ Oh, to be sure—to be sure ;” said the old gentleman ; “ you want my consent ; and I am bound to say that you have acted very well in the business,—very well indeed ; just what I should have expected from you. Yes, Hatherston, you have acted admirably ; and precisely as I should have wished a son of mine to act under such circumstances. No such easy matter either ; for, bless me ! when I come to reflect what opportunities you have had of pleading your own cause, it does you credit, my boy, that you have exercised so much self-control : it does you infinite credit ; it is really very uncommon at your age.”

“ But, Sir Hercules——”

“ True — true — you are still waiting for your answer. Take it, then. Not even you can know the value of what you ask ; but you shall not ask in vain. No, Hatherston,

much as I shall miss my little Ella, the dear girl who has been to me almost more than a daughter for years past—who has borne with my peevishness, soothed my sufferings, and been as a light in my sick room—I feel that I could not bestow her on one more worthy of her than yourself.”

“Ten thousand thanks, my dear sir! You have made me the happiest of men. May I now hope that on the return of the ladies, you will be kind enough to communicate my proposal to Lady Harriette, while I endeavour to make it acceptable to your niece?”

“With all my heart, and I promise you my lady’s concurrence at once, for she cannot fail to be as much gratified as myself.”

“With your permission, then, I will now leave you for a short time in order to inform my uncle; and yet, no; that would be too presumptuous before I have ascertained the——”

“Pooh, pooh, boy! you have nothing to ascertain. If Ella does not love you, I know

very little of her sex ; and, besides, the thing is impossible.”

“ You must not flatter my vanity too much, Sir Hercules ; you see how presumptuous I already am.”

“ Well, well, have it your own way ;” laughed the baronet, shaking him heartily by the hand ; “ have it your own way ; and wear the willow, if you fancy it becomes you, until the return of the carriage. We shall hear no more of it afterwards, I dare say.”

CHAPTER XVII.

A CONFIDENCE.

SOMEWHAT to the surprise of Sir Hercules and his young companion, his daughters and their escort returned to Ashton Court before Lady Harriette and her niece, Lord Elwood and Matilda having apparently changed characters during their ride ; for while the dark eye of the young man flashed with an unwonted light, and a smile played about his lips, the young lady was on the contrary grave to seriousness ; and so evidently embarrassed, that had it been possible for Matilda Ashton ever to be awkward, she would most assuredly have accomplished the feat that day.

Florence had recovered her equanimity; and, flushed with exercise, looked radiantly beautiful. Even Hatherston, pre-occupied as he was, felt himself compelled to admit that she had never appeared half so lovely. But still it was not the lofty and magnificent beauty of Ella; bright as were the eyes, and sweet as were the smiles of Miss Ashton, (and she smiled even upon him as he lifted her from her horse), the soul which beamed through every look and motion of the orphan were wanting in her cousin. A mere man of the world would have given the palm to Florence, for he would not have looked beyond the dazzling complexion, the graceful carriage, and the high-bred deportment; but a less superficial observer would have decided otherwise, and almost forgotten the physical loveliness of Ella in the glorious emanation of intellect which made her expressive features the very index of her high pure spirit.

“Frank!” exclaimed Horace, as he sprang from his saddle; “if you have not become

quite a churl, perhaps you will bestow half an hour of your valuable time upon me. I long to stretch my legs a little after our long gallop. What say you to a stroll in the park?"

"The very proposal I was about to make to you, Horry;" was the ready reply; "Let us wander as far as the root-house where we found your cousin and her ayah after poor Diana's escapade. It is pleasant to renew old memories."

"With all my heart;" said young Ashton with extraordinary alacrity; "We have seen a good deal since that day, but nevertheless the old root-house will never lose its interest in my eyes."

"Nor in mine; the whole adventure was so wild and singular that it produced a powerful impression on the mind not at all likely to wear off. How devotedly that poor Indian woman loved her little nurseling!"

"To whom I, on one occasion, behaved like a brute;" observed Horace in a tone of compunction.

“Well, well; boys will be boys; and I am convinced that you never repeated the offence.”

“I trust not.”

For a few moments the two friends strolled on in silence, each busy with his own thoughts; but at length Horace, turning with a gratified smile to his companion, said gaily; “I am much deceived, Hatherston, or we shall soon have a wedding in our family.”

“I should not wonder,” quietly replied Frank; who, full of his own hopes and projects, had scarcely comprehended the words which fell upon his ear.

“Why, you sly fellow! So you had discovered the secret, had you?”

“Secret? What secret?” asked Frank hastily; “I am sure it was not my wish that there should be any mystery in the affair.”

“Not *your* wish!” echoed Horace; “Why, what in the name of all that is marvellous, had you to do with Lord Elwood’s attachment to Matilda?”

“Lord Elwood’s attachment to Matilda?” echoed Hatherston in his turn, his attention now thoroughly awakened: “I am delighted to hear it; sincerely delighted; but by no means surprised; for I know by experience how almost impossible it is for a man to be domesticated at Ashton Court, and not lose his heart to one or other of its inmates.”

“Frank!”

“Oh, my dear fellow, I am not speaking without reflection. I would not be guilty of such disrespect to your kind and excellent family. But tell me more of the business to which you allude. It must be confessed that his lordship, sedate as he looks, has lost no time. However, we know the old distich:—

‘Happy’s the wooing,
That’s not long a’ doing;’—

and so we will hope that it may prove in this case.”

“Remark, if you please, that mine is purely circumstantial evidence;” interposed Horace;

“ but I am greatly mistaken if a perfect understanding has not been established this very day between ‘the high contracting parties.’ Mark this, Frank. When we started Matilda was all life and vivacity, tossing her amber curls to the wind, and teasing her little mare till she leapt and bounded like a wild goat ; and so she continued until on entering a green lane, where there was barely room for two to ride abreast, we slackened our pace ; (for we had indulged in a sharp canter across the common, and our horses were almost blown ;) but never was there such a change after we emerged from it ! I should tell you that Florence and I chanced to be a little ahead when we reached the lane ; and consequently our lovers, for such I am convinced they are, were at liberty to loiter as they pleased. The first thing I remarked was, that we were scarcely in the shade before Elwood dismounted to gather a branch of hedge-roses for the young lady ; and it was really astonishing—(I may as well admit that I watched the manœuvre) it was

really quite astonishing how obstinately the identical branch which he had selected persisted in adhering to the bush. I offered to perform a similar act of gallantry for Florence ; but, having no romance in her composition, she declined to trouble me, and declared the roses in the conservatory at home to be far more to her taste. So we walked our horses quietly on ; and from two or three sly glances which I cast behind me, I soon perceived that there was no necessity for haste. The lane did, however, at last come to an end ; and you may imagine my surprise when, on arriving at its termination Elwood calmly informed me that Matilda, whose flushed cheek and down-cast eyes at once betrayed her secret, had been suddenly attacked by so violent a headache that if I would accompany Florence to Beauchamp Abbey, he would take charge of her sister home. To this proposition I was, however, by no means inclined to subscribe ; and detecting a smile on the lip of Florry, which convinced me that she put no faith in the

headache, I proposed in my turn that the excursion to the ruin should be deferred, and that we should all return together. No sooner said than done: we turned our horses' heads, by which means the happy pair found us in the rear instead of themselves: an arrangement which I imagine did not prove so pleasant as the former one, for no sooner did we arrive on the edge of the common than they burst into a rapid gallop, which they maintained until we arrived at the lodge."

"Strong presumptive evidence, indeed;" said Frank; "and a great improvement upon the original object of your ride. I have no doubt that both Sir Hercules and Lady Harriette will receive the intelligence with pleasure; for Elwood is more than a peer of the realm, he is an honourable, high-minded young man, of excellent principle. He wanted nothing but such a merry-hearted wife as your sister to make him one of the most agreeable fellows in the world."

"All that is perfectly true, Hatherston, and

I confess that I feel proud of my little sis' when I reflect that she has won such a heart as his—won her first love too—it is rare indeed that either man or woman succeeds in doing that."

"I trust not, Horry."

"Nevertheless, I fear that I am right."

"I repeat that I trust not; for to be candid with you, I am about to try my fortune in the same lottery."

"You, Hatherston?" exclaimed Horace, stopping, and looking earnestly in the face of his friend; "are you quite sure that it *will* be your first love? I confess I had feared that—that—"

"That what?" enquired Frank, not without a certain consciousness which drove the warm blood to his brow; "Did you fancy that I had not eyes, senses, and feelings like the rest of my sex?"

"By no means; but still—"

"Well, Horace, I will not urge you to conclude your somewhat ambiguous sentence, but tell you frankly that I am over head and ears

in love with your beautiful and pure-minded cousin."

"And Ella?"—gasped his listener.

"Unfortunately I am not yet able to answer that question; for, situated as I have been in your family, I considered it my duty to mention my attachment to your excellent father before I ventured to appeal to Ella herself; but this much I am proud and happy to assure you, that Sir Hercules not only gave me his full consent to address his niece, but also pledged himself for that of Lady Harriette; so that if I have been fortunate enough to secure the regard of the sweetest and most gifted girl who ever walked the earth, I shall have no cause to envy Elwood or any other man breathing. Will you not wish me success, Horry?"

"You are a strange fellow, Hatherston;" said young Ashton, struggling at a smile as he evaded the question; "And when are you to ascertain your fate?"

"This very day, I trust; and now you will comprehend why I so much desired to revisit the old root-house."

CHAPTER XVIII.

HAPPY HEARTS.

LITTLE had Lady Harriette anticipated, while tossing over the silks, satins, and laces which were profusely exhibited for her selection by the obsequious tradesmen of the little town which she had that morning honoured with her presence, the important but conflicting intelligence that awaited her at home.

Her first interview was with Matilda, by whom she was waylaid as she was proceeding to her husband's room, and hurried to the library; where, with her face hidden in her mother's bosom, the agitated girl poured forth her "love's history," amid blushes and tears

enough to have sufficed to half-a-dozen fashionable young ladies.

Unlike Florence, her sister still retained much of her genuine and genial nature ; her better feelings, despite the narrow and manœuvring policy of her worldly-minded mother, had not been thoroughly crushed out ; and thus, under the influence of a pure and sincere affection, she became once more simple, guileless, and earnest.

The heart of Lady Harriette swelled high as she pressed her lips to the brow of her daughter. Never had she felt so proud of her ; and while she was thinking of the high position which that daughter would soon assume as a peeress of the realm, Matilda was busily recalling every word and tone which by their subtle magic had that morning made her so supremely happy ; and as her mother was complacently assuring her how delighted she should be to welcome Lord Elwood as a son-in-law, her more unsophisticated child was whispering to herself, “ Algernon,” “ dear Al-

gernon ;” and blushing at the feeling of delight produced by the utterance of those simple words.

“Have you informed your father of this event ?” at length demanded the exulting mother.

“No, dear mamma ; *he* promised to do so, while I undertook to tell it all to you. But indeed, indeed, I can say no more to-day, for I require time to think, and to convince myself that it is not all a dream.”

“Why surely, my silly child, you must have been long prepared for Lord Elwood’s proposal ? Even I have been expecting it for some time past.”

“No indeed, mamma, I never dared to hope that he thought of me as a wife, although I was aware that I amused him ; but Florence was so much handsomer than me, that I supposed, if indeed he cared enough for either of us, that he would select her.”

“Well, you see that for once, my dear love, you were mistaken. And now, go to your

room, change your dress, and dry your tears, for they are a poor compliment to your suitor. Be under no alarm as to the reply which your father will make to his lordship, for I may at once assure you that he will be as much gratified as myself. You have done credit to my training, Matilda, and I have not been disappointed in you."

Once more Lady Harriette tenderly embraced the excited girl; and then, with a glowing cheek and a lofty tread, she hastened to seek Sir Hercules.

"Well, my lady;" exclaimed the old gentleman as soon as she appeared: "this has been an eventful day at Ashton Court. Lord Elwood has just left me; and of course I need not tell you his errand. He loved our little girl it seems before he went abroad, but was anxious to know more of her before he asked her hand. Nothing could be more frank and straightforward than the whole of his conduct; and though he laments that for a time they will be compelled to economise, I

do not apprehend that the economy of the Chase will be very irksome to Matilda."

"The whole affair is highly satisfactory ;" said his wife ; "and I confess that I give myself considerable credit for the invitation which brought Lord Elwood to Ashton Court, though I little expected to have seen Matilda a peeress. However, everything is no doubt for the best ; and Florence is handsome enough to wait."

"But what say you to the proposal of Hatherston ?"

"The proposal of Hatherston !" repeated the lady ; "When ?—To whom ?"

"Ah, I forgot ;" chuckled the baronet ; "I have had the secret to myself so far. Well then, be it known to you at last, that he has formally demanded the hand of my niece."

"Of your niece, Sir Hercules ?" said Lady Harriette, as her thin lips grew purple ; "and what was your answer ?"

"That I gave her to him as I would have

given him one of my own daughters, with all my heart; and that, moreover, I could assure him that you would do the same."

"Oh, of course, what possible objection could *I* make?" asked his wife bitterly; "but it remains to be seen how far his wealthy uncle may approve of his marrying a girl without a penny."

"Hatherston appears to have no misgivings on the subject;" was the rejoinder of the baronet; "and it is, beyond all doubt, a most eligible match for Ella."

"A fact which she will duly appreciate, I am convinced;" said his companion still more bitterly; "he had no reason to apprehend any difficulty with the young lady herself."

"I should conceive not;" was the cheerful rejoinder; "young ladies seldom make difficulties in such cases. However, he behaved like the noble fellow he is, for he had not said one word to Ella before he obtained my permission to do so."

“And you believe this, Sir Hercules?” demanded his lady with a sneer.

“Most certainly I do.”

“My *dear* Sir Hercules, you quite amuse me. A very probable story indeed! Rely on it that your niece had nothing to learn upon the subject when you were honoured with their confidence. Well, I can only say that Miss Ella Ashton is a most fortunate girl, and that she can never be sufficiently grateful to the relatives who have afforded her the opportunity of making such a marriage.”

“I do not see, my dear, that it is beyond either her pretensions, or her deserts.”

“Of her pretensions I will say nothing, Sir Hercules, as although a dependent upon your bounty she is still your niece; but of her deserts I must be permitted to be more doubtful, as I happen to be aware that before Mr. Hatherston left England, he had bestowed his affections upon your daughter Florence. However, I will not condescend

to explain by what artful conduct he was induced to transfer them to her cousin. A man who could be weak enough to be so blinded by his own vanity can scarcely be an object of regret to any woman of proper spirit."

"You are talking enigmas, my lady ;" said the baronet, considerably ruffled by the tone which his wife had assumed ; "and it is, to say the least, rather extraordinary that if Mr. Hatherston ever led one of my daughters to suppose that he wished to make her his wife, I, as her father and natural guardian, should not have been made acquainted with the fact. I shall speak to him on the subject ; for if he has indeed trifled with the happiness of a child of mine, he is unworthy to be entrusted with that of my niece."

"Pray calm yourself, Sir Hercules ;" replied Lady Harriette with another bitter sneer ; "you must surely be aware that the code of honour recognised by your sex is exceedingly elastic ; and consequently that as the gentle-

man in question never actually compromised himself by a proposal, he can readily deny the truth of my assertion; nor do I wish the name of *my* daughter to be involved in any such disgraceful affair."

"Upon my honour, Lady Harriette——"

"Oh, we will talk no more of honour, if you please;" said the mortified and irate lady; "let Mr. Hatherston marry your niece. I am sure I have no wish to raise any objection; only I have to request that until the happy event takes place, he will be obliging enough to seek another home."

"*That* he will undoubtedly do without any suggestion of mine;" almost growled the baronet, who was by this time thoroughly out of temper at the ungracious manner, and ungenerous insinuations of his wife; "particularly as after what has passed between Matilda and Lord Elwood, I shall insist on his also leaving Ashton Court until the period of their marriage."

This declaration fortunately changed the

current of his wife's thoughts ; and, anxious to convince herself that the future peeress had followed her advice and wiped away her tears, she left the room without making any reply.

CHAPTER XIX.

FRIENDS OR FOES.

It is strange and startling to reflect how, occasionally, the events of a few moments influence the whole of our after-existence. How mysteriously our most decided intentions are thwarted, and rendered abortive. How all the plans and purposes of our deliberate reason are scattered to the winds when we consider them the most stable. How, in fine, we are the mere puppets of circumstance, while we vainly imagine that we can control, not only ourselves, but even those about us.

Frank Hatherston had parted from Sir

Hercules Ashton, if not firmly convinced, at least hopefully trustful, that he at length stood on the threshold of success. Secure in the affection of his uncle, and building up the most brilliant hopes upon the gentle words and still more gentle smiles of the beautiful orphan, he never suffered himself to believe that a cloud could gather upon the horizon of his happiness. In vain did the remembrance force itself upon him that as yet he had breathed no sentence which could lead her to imagine how dear she was to him. Absorbed by his own deep feeling of affection, he could not realise the fact that by her it might have remained totally unsuspected. It seemed, indeed, incomprehensible that a being so perfect should consider it possible for any one to have been constantly thrown into contact with her without being aware that she held his future fate in his hands ; and surely, with this consciousness, the high-hearted Ella would never have trifled with his feelings.

Poor Frank ! He had yet to learn that the

orphan, absorbed in her own anxieties, and too lowly-minded to imagine that she could divert the affections of any one from her brilliant cousins, had never for an instant suspected the nature of the spell which bound her unsought lover to Ashton Court; and it was consequently almost with a feeling of dismay that she heard him declare his passion, and plead for a return.

What could she say? Her regard and friendship had long been his: she was grateful, deeply grateful, to him for many acts of kindness, for many proofs of consideration, which to her were doubly precious from their rarity. How often had he not cheered her solitude by sharing it with her: improved her tastes by widening her knowledge; and interested her imagination while he instructed her mind. It is true that she had learnt much from books, but even books cannot necessarily produce the same impression as the graphic narrative of an observant and unprejudiced eye-witness; and such Hatherston had em-

phatically been. With him travel had not been a mere barren indulgence: he had reflected as well as seen; and, devoted as she was to her more impetuous cousin, Ella was reluctantly compelled to admit to herself that he possessed neither the stability of purpose, nor the accuracy of judgment, which distinguished his friend.

But still her heart yearned to Horace; and who shall say that she did not love him the more after she had herself set a seal upon his lips, irksome alike to both parties; although she little dreamt of the suffering to which she had condemned him, as he saw Hatherston day by day beside her, free to absorb her attention, and to direct her studies; when he heard their voices blend in the same harmony, and her occasional appeal to him for counsel and assistance; and thus, as Hatherston pale with emotion stood before her, and told her how long and how well he had loved her; how he had appreciated her frank and noble nature; and with what earnestness he would devote him-

self to her happiness, the orphan could only weep, and entreat of him to pardon her, if, never for a moment anticipating such a result to their friendship, she had unwittingly misled him.

“What am I to understand, Miss Ashton?” gasped out the young man; “Do you indeed seek to cast from you an affection as sincere as it is unalterable? Reflect, I entreat of you, that a few words—one word—from your lips, will make me the most happy or the most wretched of created beings. Ella—dear Ella—it is a solemn thing to pronounce the sentence which is to condemn a fellow-being to an existence of regret and disappointment.”

“Oh, do not, do not so wring my heart, Mr. Hatherston;” sobbed the orphan; “As a friend, as a brother—I shall always regard and value you. You have been so kind, so *very* kind, to the desolate girl who owes many of her brightest hours to your companionship, that your memory will ever be one of her most cherished treasures; but ask no more of me, for indeed—indeed—”

“Miss Ashton ;” said Frank tremulously ; “after the appeal which I have just made to you, knowing what I do of your character, I feel that all further urgency on my part would only distress you, without serving my own cause. Were you a woman of the world—aware as I am that from the seclusion in which you habitually live you can have formed no other attachment—I should look upon your words as a mere exhibition of coquetry, intended to enhance the value of my ultimate success ; but with you I know that it is otherwise, and that I have no alternative save to accept your decision. Yet still, if there exists one hope that time——”

“No—no—never ;” murmured Ella, as a burning blush spread over her brow and bosom.

“In that case ;” said the young man somewhat bitterly ; “I can only lament that I should have been deemed unworthy of your love.”

“No—no ;” exclaimed the orphan once

more ; while, for the first time, she raised her deep eyes streaming with tears, to his face ; “ It is I—I who am unworthy of so noble, so generous an affection. You cannot understand how sincerely I respect and esteem you ; how proud I should have been to have called myself your wife, if—if——”

“ If what ?—I beseech you tell me what obstacle exists to the realisation of this, my one dream of happiness in this world ; and be it what it may, should it be in the power of man to overcome it, trust me it shall be overcome !”

“ Why should I not trust you, good and honourable as you are ?” said the weeping girl : “ I owe it to you to do so ; and painful as it is to give my secret into the keeping of another, I will pay the debt.” Then burying her face, which had suddenly become ashy pale, in her spread hands, she whispered the one word : “ Horace.”

Hatherston started as though an adder had stung him, but he did not utter a syllable.

He stood for a few seconds gazing fixedly on the bowed head and labouring bosom before him, while a spasm of intense suffering crossed his features ; and then, silently raising the border of her scarf to his lips, he walked noiselessly from the room.

In the hall he encountered the very being who, at that moment, he least desired to meet. Need we say that it was Horace ? The two young men were equally agitated ; but their hands were simultaneously extended and grasped, as though a common feeling had only served to cement their long and steady friendship. There was no necessity for words : they understood each other at a glance.

“ Horace ;” said Hatherston at length, in a voice so husky that no one could have recognised it ; “ in half an hour I shall leave Ashton Court, never more to enter it. I dare not trust myself with any leave-taking. You must say all for me which you know I would have said. Some of my brightest, and one of my most bitter hours, will secure to it and

its inhabitants a place in my memory to the last hour of my existence. Farewell. Should we ever meet again under happier auspices, do you also remember the friendship of our youth. May you all be happy. It will be a solace to me in my own suffering to know that it is not shared by any whom I have learned to love."

"My dear Frank, let me entreat of you——"

"What would you ask?" demanded his companion almost fiercely; "Do not try me beyond my strength. The world is wide enough for both of us, and henceforward our paths are different. Let each pursue his own."

"I will not part from you thus, Hatherston;" said Horace resolutely; "I am as much, even more to be pitied than yourself. I can understand your feelings, but you cannot fathom mine. Had Ella not confessed that she loved me, I believe that I could have conquered my passion; but to know that she

does so, and to feel that in all human probability she never can be mine ; while, unlike yourself, I cannot escape her constant companionship, and am thus compelled to endure the torture of seeing the prize at which I aim perpetually within my grasp, and yet as unattainable as though we inhabited different hemispheres, is a torture which even you are unable to comprehend."

"She loves you, and knowing that, nothing can be impossible."

"Would that I could think so."

"You are not worthy of her if you admit a doubt. Had she loved *me*, the whole world should not have wrested her from me. But talk no more of this, Ashton, for I cannot answer for my self-control. Let us part friends."

"Friends !" echoed Horace.

"Aye, friends ;" repeated Frank ; "the world is full of friendships far more hollow than ours ; for you and I can never forget the past."

“This is an unfortunate fatality, Hatherston.”

“Aye, call it fate, destiny, what you will ; we are all the puppets of chance ; and here you see that the chances have been in your favour. Do not abuse them, Ashton ; let us part at once.”

“Frank, I scarcely know you in this mood. You cannot imagine how you wound me.”

“You are right ; my mood is a strange one ; but a man thrust out suddenly into a new world may be forgiven if he cannot at once assume the bearing which befits him—Horace ;” he added abruptly ; “you will speak of me to her sometimes—I care not how, even if it be to smile with her at the unmanly weakness which has changed my very nature—only speak of me ; do not let her quite forget me. I could bear anything better than the thought that I had passed away from her memory like a dream which vanished with the dayspring of her happiness.”

“You wrong us both by such a request

Frank. Neither the one nor the other is likely to forget you ; and do not, pray do not withdraw your friendship from me at a time when I so much need it. You cannot imagine the difficulty of my present position. You are aware of the ambitious nature of my mother, and how fatally exacting her views as regard myself have increased since the death of Lord Compton. I did not suffer myself to dwell upon this subject during my absence from home, nor indeed after my return, until it was forced upon me by Ella herself ; but since that time I have had several conversations with Lady Harriette, which convince me that she will never be brought to consent to my marriage with my cousin."

Hatherston made no reply.

"And now, Frank, tell me ; do you think that I can dispense with your friendship at such a time as this?"

"My dear Horace ;" said his friend, once more extending his hand with a smile that it was painful to look upon ; "be your position

what it may, Ella loves you, and you have no commiseration to expect from me. Should you—should she—ever require the good offices of one who will never fail you, remember Frank Hatherston. And now farewell.”

So saying he turned away, rapidly ascended the staircase, and shut himself into his own room.

CHAPTER XX.

A STORM-CLOUD.

“MR. HATHERSTON gone, and without any leave-taking!” exclaimed Lady Harriette the same evening, as she was taking her coffee with her husband; “What can have been the cause of such extraordinary conduct? I presume that he changed his intentions with regard to your niece, Sir Hercules, and therefore considered that it would be indelicate to remain longer under your roof. Well, I don’t know why I should feel any surprise; he has probably revolved the matter in his mind, and become convinced that he was about to commit an imprudence. It is fortunate that he

has made the discovery before it was too late."

"I regret to say that your ordinary sagacity is at fault, my lady;" replied the baronet, with a little quiet exultation; "Hatherston would not have left Ashton Court if my niece had given him any encouragement to remain."

"Why, you surely do not mean me to understand—"

"I mean you to understand, my dear, that Ella has declined his addresses."

"Who can have imposed on your credulity by such a tale?"

"Hatherston himself, who left a letter for me apologising for his abrupt departure, frankly acknowledging its cause, and entreating, should my niece at any time evince the least inclination to retract her refusal, that I will at once inform him of the fact."

"It would seem;" said the lady with asperity; "that Miss Ella Ashton still considers herself as the heiress that she should have been. One thing at least is certain, Sir Her-

cules, and that is, that her residence in your house is most unfair to Florence. Had your daughter still possessed a tolerable marriage portion I would have raised no objection ; but, as such is not the case, I feel that we are guilty of an injustice to our own child in subjecting her to the constant rivalry of such a young person as your niece."

"Her residence in my family did not prevent Lord Elwood from proposing to Matilda."

"Perhaps not ; but it certainly prevented Mr. Hatherston from marrying Florence ; and consequently—"

"Pray tell me at once what you are anxious to do ;" said the baronet testily.

"Comply with her own request ;" was the prompt reply ; "and let her reside with Madame Despreaux until Florence is provided for."

"You cannot be serious !"

"Perfectly so."

"Then I may at once inform you, my lady, that I never will consent to any such arrangement ; and that, moreover, I have reasons of

my own for not permitting her to leave this house."

"I will not affect to be unsuspicious of your meaning, Sir Hercules;" said his wife indignantly; "I have long surmised the truth. You are anxious to marry *my* son to your niece, but *that* you shall never do; and I am convinced that Horace himself would not listen to so monstrous a proposition. It may have made your sick-room very agreeable to turn it into a place of meeting for two light-headed young people, and you already see the result of your weakness; but I must request that the folly may not be repeated with Horace, who is, I trust and believe, too wise to dream of such an absurdity as falling in love with his cousin, unless—"

"Do not trouble yourself to complete the sentence, Lady Harriette; that folly,—since you are pleased to apply such a term to what appears to me to be a very simple and natural occurrence,—that folly was committed, as he has himself confided to me, years ago;

and as I see no valid objection to the match, I confess that I have felt no inclination to interfere."

"I have, however, some information to communicate to you;" said his wife with a sneer; "which may perhaps convince you that it will be your duty both to your son and to his mother to interfere forthwith. I have by this afternoon's post received a letter to acquaint me with the dangerous illness of Lord Disborough.—"

She paused a moment to ascertain the effect produced upon the baronet by her intelligence, but as he did not display the slightest emotion, she pursued with a heightened colour—

"Of course, Sir Hercules, you cannot have forgotten the change which his death must operate in the position of my son; and I now ask you whether you consider Miss Ella Ashton an eligible wife for the Earl of Disborough?"

"I do—in every way."

Lady Harriette rose slowly from her chair; and if a look could have annihilated her hus-

band, his fate, if not that of Horace, would have been then and there decided.

“I regret that our opinions on the subject should be so much at variance;” was her rejoinder; “but I am at least resolved that the name of my family shall not be desecrated by an alliance with the penniless daughter of a bankrupt-merchant; and that no son of mine—”

“Madam;” shouted the baronet, making an abortive effort to rise in his turn; “You appear to overlook the fact that Mr. Horace Ashton is also *my* son; and that a disappointed merchant is to the full as respectable a member of society as a bankrupt peer.”

“Be good enough to remember, Sir Hercules Ashton, that you are speaking of *my* father.”

“And you, madam, of my brother, about whose affairs you know absolutely nothing.”

“I think, however, that we are fortunate enough to possess under our roof a living proof of the fact.”

“ We are fortunate in possessing her indeed, if you allude to that brother’s child, although you have, and can have, no authority for stigmatising his memory ; but, as you are well aware, it is repugnant to me to bandy words with a woman ; and this discussion appears also to be singularly mistimed, and ill-suited to be hereafter remembered in association with your father’s death-bed.”

“ It would appear, nevertheless, that I have acted prudently in no longer delaying to inform you that I will never consent to the marriage which you, Sir Hercules, consider so eligible ; and if, as I suspect, the young lady refused her hand to Mr. Hatherston with the idea of bestowing it on the grandson of Lord Disborough, she has been guilty of a mistake which she will probably repent as long as she lives. As to Horace, I have no fear of his committing himself by so gross a violation of his duty to me ; but still it is well that I have been made aware of what I have to contend against.”

It is impossible to decide what might have been the nature of the reply which the baronet would have seen fit to make to the taunt of his wife, as at that moment Horace entered the room; and addressing his mother, announced the arrival of Lord Elwood.

“ I will join my daughters in five minutes ;” she said, in a hard dry tone ; “ for I trust that I at least know and feel what is due to my children, even should they themselves forget it. Your father will explain my meaning, Horace ; and I am confident that, when he has done so, it will be unnecessary for me to enter into any discussion with you upon the same subject. My resolution is taken, and no power on earth shall induce me to alter it. Remember this, as it may save us both a vast deal of unpleasant and useless argument. I have of course no wish to interfere with the authority of Sir Hercules ; but I am not the less resolved to maintain my own. I would only remind you that should you think proper to disregard it, I have it in my power to retain

the title of your grandfather until my death before I transmit it to you ; and rely on my word, that I will do so in the event of your disregarding my wishes.”

As she ceased speaking Lady Harriette left the room without waiting for any reply ; and before she joined her daughters her brow was as smooth, and her deportment as stately as though nothing had occurred to ruffle her.

Her meaning was soon explained to her son, whose happiness she had declared herself resolved to sacrifice to her own selfish vanity ; and his reply was brief.

“ I can wait.”

“ My poor boy !” sighed Sir Hercules, as he saw the gloom which spread itself over the face of Horace.

“ Do not suppose for an instant, my dear father ;” said the young man ; “ that the threat held out by my mother would deter me from claiming the hand of my cousin this very day. I care nothing for the title of Lord Disborough, which he has sullied by a life of profligacy ;

but, regardless as she has shewn herself of my feelings, I cannot forget that Lady Harriette is still my mother ; and, as I before said, I can wait. Time may prove my friend."

"You know, Horace;" was the reply of the baronet; "that in this case I am powerless. It must be as your mother wills in so far as regards your position during her life ; and at all events, my dear boy, though our hopes are at present great of profiting largely by the speculation into which I was induced to enter, its only present effect has been to render me poorer than ever ; and, should another emergency like the last occur, I shall find it difficult, if not impossible, to meet the demand made upon me without a very serious sacrifice which must cripple us for some time to come. Moreover, remember that you are both too young to think of marriage yet ; and that, although Lady Harriette has spoken of the possession of this high-sounding title as a thing already within her grasp, Lord Disborough is still alive, and may possibly live

on for years. Be patient, therefore ; and, as you have truly said, time may work great changes."

In one of his calculations, however, Sir Hercules was destined to disappointment, as the following post announced to Lady Harriette the death of the Earl.

CHAPTER XXI.

A GREAT MAN'S ELEGY.

No event could have occurred at a more unfortunate moment for the family at Ashton Court than the demise of Lord Disborough, necessitating as it did a great accession of outlay, for which a mere empty name was the only immediate return ; as, shortly after the death of his son, the earl had disposed of all the remaining portion of his property which was saleable, while the rest was heavily mortgaged. There were, moreover, disputed claims which required the interference of the law ; debts which it was requisite to liquidate ; the expenses of a pompous funeral—for even the

solemn mockery of a splendid interment was deemed indispensable to the man who had ruined himself and impoverished his heirs—and the residence in town, indefinite in its duration, of Horace and his mother.

The latter it was, moreover, necessary should be undertaken at once, in order to check the rapacity of the menials with whom the deceased earl had to the last ostentatiously surrounded himself: and once more the solicitor of Sir Hercules was suddenly summoned; his own signature and that of his son appended to an ominous-looking parchment; and the half heart-broken old baronet, as he laid down his pen, had the mortifying consciousness that he had suddenly become an embarrassed man, with a mortgage on a considerable portion of his ancestral estate.

It was in vain the lawyer assured him that the arrangement which he had been enabled to make was one of an unusually favourable nature; and reminded him that, in all probability, he would soon be enabled to rid

himself of the encumbrance through the medium of a speculation which promised to produce so rich a harvest as the Cutemclose and Marshford railway : the baronet felt humbled in his own eyes. He was the first Ashton who had not been undisputed lord of his own lands ; the first who had signed away his birthright ; the first who must, should circumstances still prove adverse, bequeathe to his son a crippled inheritance.

Bitter reflections these for the high-hearted old man, with whom family pride had been the ruling principle of existence ; but the medal had, fortunately, a reverse. The railroad works were progressing gloriously : Mr. Goldworthy was radiant ; and, although the prospect was remote enough, the period must ultimately come when the Disborough estates would be once more unencumbered.

On Lady Harriette, now Countess of Disborough, the present position of her husband produced little or no effect. She looked boldly into the future ; and with a reckless-

ness which she probably inherited from her father, she wilfully disregarded all temporary embarrassments, and always saw something magnificent looming in the future. Of the mortification which was fretting away the strength and spirits of Sir Hercules, she took no heed ; she was dwelling upon the speedy aggrandisement of her son ; and, let us once more do her justice, she thought little of her own.

But, meanwhile, Horace himself was wretched. To him the death of his grandfather presented only a new obstacle to the one hope of his existence ; and for a time he trusted that he should be able to induce his mother to retain the title during her lifetime. No argument, however, sufficed to win her to his purpose.

“ My mind has long been made up on that point ;” she said resolutely ; “ I have looked forward to this event for years ; and I make the sacrifice, since you seem to consider it as such, cheerfully and without hesitation. You

know what I expect from you in return. I trust to your honour. I make no request ; I issue a command, and a command which you must obey. You are yet a mere boy, and cannot be supposed to possess sufficient experience to enable you to decide so important a step as the one you have been mad enough to contemplate. Your father, who clings to the memory of his dead brother with a romance which is pitiable at his years, would gladly secure the elevation of that brother's child even at the expense of your future prospects ; but *I* have no such weakness. I do not affect to regret the late Lord Disborough ; he has been the ruin of his family ; and it remains for you, as my son, to redeem the name, and to uphold the station which his follies, to use no harsher term, have tarnished. I have a right to expect this from you, and I will not be disappointed in my expectation. You will do well to leave your destiny in my hands, and to remember that the interests of your mother and sisters must

not be made subservient to your own egotism."

"Yet, my dear mother, I must be permitted to remind you——"

"Of what?" asked Lady Harriette haughtily.

"That on a question which involves the whole happiness of my future life;" said Horace firmly; "I have also a right to be heard. With every respect for yourself, and with sincere gratitude for your self-abnegation in my behalf, I do solemnly assure you that I never have, and that I never shall, covet the title of my grandfather. As the son of Sir Hercules Ashton I can command such a position in society as satisfies my ambition. Why then should I be called upon to forfeit all my best feelings for a mere sound?"

"Enough, Horace, enough;" exclaimed Lady Harriette impatiently; "do not play the schoolboy, when you should assert yourself as becomes my son. We now have, thanks to my energy which eventually overcame the apathy of your father, the prospect

of wealth ; and no more is needed to release the Disborough property, and to place you on a level with the greatest and the proudest in the land. Am I to sue to you to accept such a station, when your alternative must be to vegetate in the country as a mere obscure country gentleman like Sir Hercules Ashton? I will not think so meanly of you."

"I have no desire to marry for years to come;" said the young man, struggling to suppress his emotion.

"We will not discuss that point ;" was the rejoinder of his mother, as a meaning smile played about her thin lips ; "I do not require you, like Hamlet, to make the 'funeral baked meats coldly furnish forth the marriage table ;' we have business enough upon our hands at present, without volunteering anything so troublesome as matrimony."

That Lady Harriette Ashton still loved her son better than all else on earth there could be no doubt, but her love was not pure and unalloyed. She had looked upon him, from

his very birth, as the probable instrument of her ambition ; and such she had resolved that he should be. As the mother of the Earl of Disborough, she regained the position which she had lost by becoming the wife of a country baronet ; the coronet resting on the brow of Horace ennobled her in her own eyes : while it would be moreover her own gift ; a distinction which even his father had not the power to bestow upon him ; and all these considerations rendered it easy to her farsighted ladyship to forego the gratification of her personal vanity, and to see her own greatness transferred to her only son.

The “melancholy event,” as the death of every worthless man of rank is commonly designated in the public papers, had moreover produced other effects in the Ashton family besides those which we have already mentioned. Sir Hercules, crushed by the unforeseen difficulties that had so suddenly overwhelmed him, was once more prostrated by gout, of so violent a nature that had not

his wife been absorbed by the duties and emergencies of her new position, she might have felt it impossible to leave his side, and still more impossible to deprive him of the care and affection of his son; while Lord Elwood was apprised that, during the absence of Lady Harriette, he must curtail the duration, and diminish the frequency, of his visits to Matilda.

Assuredly, never were honors more unwelcome than those which had devolved upon the baronet and his children.

It will be readily imagined that the journey to town was far from a pleasant one to Horace. The exultation of his mother, an exultation which for the time caused her totally to overlook the fact that it was her own father who still laid unburied in his loveless home, wounded the more sensitive feelings of her son. It was true that long years had elapsed since the earl and his daughter had met, or held any communication with each other. A cold letter to announce the birth of each of her children, had

produced as cold a reply ; whilst that by which he had been apprised of Matilda's intended marriage had, doubtlessly in consequence of his illness, remained unanswered. It was not, therefore, under such circumstances as these, to be anticipated that Lady Harriette would either feel or affect any very violent grief ; but still there is a sacredness in the tie which unites a parent with his child that demands at least a decent semblance of mourning ; and the young man almost loathed himself as he reflected that it was her ambition for him which had deadened his mother's heart to one of the holiest feelings of our nature.

On their arrival in town his melancholy deepened ; for, as he entered the vast and magnificent mansion of the earl (denuded though it was of everything by which its late profligate owner could contrive to raise money), and saw the eyes of Lady Harriette flash with haughty triumph, he became more than ever aware of the extent of the obstacle which would thenceforward exist to his marriage with his cousin.

He could wait. True; he had declared as much; but it is a weary watch that is kept without hope; a night upon which no dawn promises to rise, swells its minutes into hours; and such Horace at once felt would be his case.

Let it not be believed, however, that this consideration weakened even for an instant either his love for the orphan, or his determination to make her his wife. Sir Hercules had truly said that they were both too young to dream of marriage for years; while he well knew that his father was almost as anxious as himself that he should become the husband of his cousin; and he consequently resolved not to dwell more than he could avoid upon far-off difficulties, but to give all his energy to the new duties which had devolved upon him.

The arrival of the travellers in Grosvenor Square having been previously announced, they found all the household prepared to receive them, and a luncheon laid in the lofty and spacious dining-room; where two grave-looking personages, who introduced each other as the

physician and solicitor of the late earl, were, on their entrance, engaged in conversation.

Lady Harriette, in an ample robe of black velvet, and leaning on the arm of her son, met them with a calm and dignified demeanour, by which they were both visibly impressed. As we have already said, there was no affectation of grief in her manner, but a quiet and self-possessed seriousness which at once put them at their ease.

Having introduced her son, and seated herself at table, she invited her guests by a silent gesture to take their places ; not, however, without a feeling of sincere mortification as she perceived the scantiness of the service. The magnificent plate which she still remembered, was not visible ; the richly-cut crystal with which it had formerly been contrasted, was replaced by common glass ; and there was a squalor in the whole of the arrangements which made the pompous array of liveried attendants appear almost absurd.

“ May I ask, Mr. Broderip ;” she said, as she glanced over the table, “ if this was the usual style of his lordship ?”

The lawyer bowed affirmatively.

As the presence of the servants forbade all further conversation upon so delicate a subject, the repast was almost a silent one, and, at its conclusion, Lady Harriette declared herself ready to listen to any communications which her visitors desired to make.

Having adjourned to the library, whose empty shelves told another dreary tale of improvidence, the party once more seated themselves ; and Mr. Broderip, taking a large packet from his breast-pocket, laid it on a desk before him, and enquired respectfully if Lady Disborough desired to hear the will read before the final ceremonies were over ?

A flash like lightning shot from the eyes of Lady Harriette, and she compressed her thin lips forcibly as she answered.

“ I apprehend, sir, from what I have already seen to-day, that the reading of my late father’s

will can be only one of those ceremonies to which you have just alluded. We will therefore, if you please, defer it until more pressing matters are arranged. I should wish to see him once more before we are finally separated, if Dr. Armitage will permit me to do so."

"Certainly, madam;" was the reply of the physician; "I will have the honour of conducting you to his lordship's room whenever you feel equal to the effort."

"Let us then go at once, sir;" said Lady Harriette rising, and beckoning her son to her side; she followed Dr. Armitage from the library.

It was the first time that Horace Ashton had looked on death; and now there lay before him, in an apartment draped with black, overcanopied by folds of velvet, and coffined in crimson, the man whose worldly honours he was shortly to inherit. There lay the descendant of a long line of nobles; and what remained of all the greatness before which so many of his fellow-men had recently bowed

down? Only the solemn mockery of state, which, in its turn, would soon be hidden in the grave.

Cold, and stern, and still, lay the form once convulsed with passion, heated by intemperance, and worn by excitement. The eyelids livid, the lips slightly parted, revealing the clenched teeth, and the cheeks sunk and wasted. The battle of life had here indeed been fought and lost by him who lay stretched where no tear was destined to be shed over his pale corpse. Unloving he had lived—unloved he died. There was a miserable sensation of abandonment in that death-room which no ostentatious splendour could banish ; and which struck to the heart of the young man.

And was it for this, he mentally asked himself, that the best and purest feelings of human nature were to be sacrificed? For this!

His mother leant heavily upon his arm ; and as she gazed fixedly upon the rigid features of the dead man, those who looked upon her were struck by the strong resemblance

which she bore to him. She did not weep, but Horace felt her whole frame quiver; and when she at length turned away, he uttered a sigh of relief.

“I trust, madam;” said the lawyer, who was awaiting her return in the library, as she sank into a chair, and pressed her hand upon her forehead; “that your ladyship’s orders have been strictly obeyed.”

“To the letter, sir;” was the reply, in a voice so calm and steady, that it absolutely startled her son; “the Earl of Disborough must at least meet that consideration from his descendants which he unfortunately failed to exhibit towards them. You are already aware, that Sir ^{London} Horace Ashton is, from the very precarious state of his health, unable to pay the last respect to my father; but my son will be his representative. To-morrow you will excuse my seeing you: but on the following day I shall be prepared to enter into the important business which we have to transact.”

The leave-taking of the two professional men

was brief; but, as they parted, a few words were exchanged between them.

“Broderip,” said the physician, with his foot upon the step of his chariot; “there will be no consumption of ether or *eau de luce* to-morrow. The new Countess has no lack of nerve.”

“My dear doctor,” smiled the lawyer, with a knowing twinkle in his eye; “‘What’s in a name?’ and you know that the poor lady will inherit nothing more—except debts. Fine young fellow, that son of hers; I am really sorry for him.—And I *have* heard;” he added, lowering his voice almost to a whisper; “that the family pride, which has led her ladyship to authorise the ostentatious outlay of the Earl’s funeral, will, in all probability, cripple the Ashton family for twelve months to come. What a world it is! And how many a good man is put into his grave so simply that the meanest passer-by cares not to inquire his name, while our noble friend—excuse the perversion of terms—who never did either a

kind act or a wise one, will to-morrow be taken to the family-vault with as much pomp as though the plumes and escutcheons—the crimson velvet and the silver-gilt plates, were to purchase for him perfect impunity in the world to come.”

“I fear, my good sir;” said the physician, as he settled himself comfortably in the corner of his carriage; “that this is a folly of which the world will never be cured. However, that is the affair of the undertaker, and those by whom he is employed; and one with which we, at least, have nothing to do. I will be in Grosvenor Square by eleven to-morrow.”

The lawyer leapt into his brougham; and both drove off. The house of death was left to those who were supposed to hold their watch over the departed: and all was still.

END OF VOL. II.

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